



Cooking with
wild game.

異世界料理道

VOLUME
2

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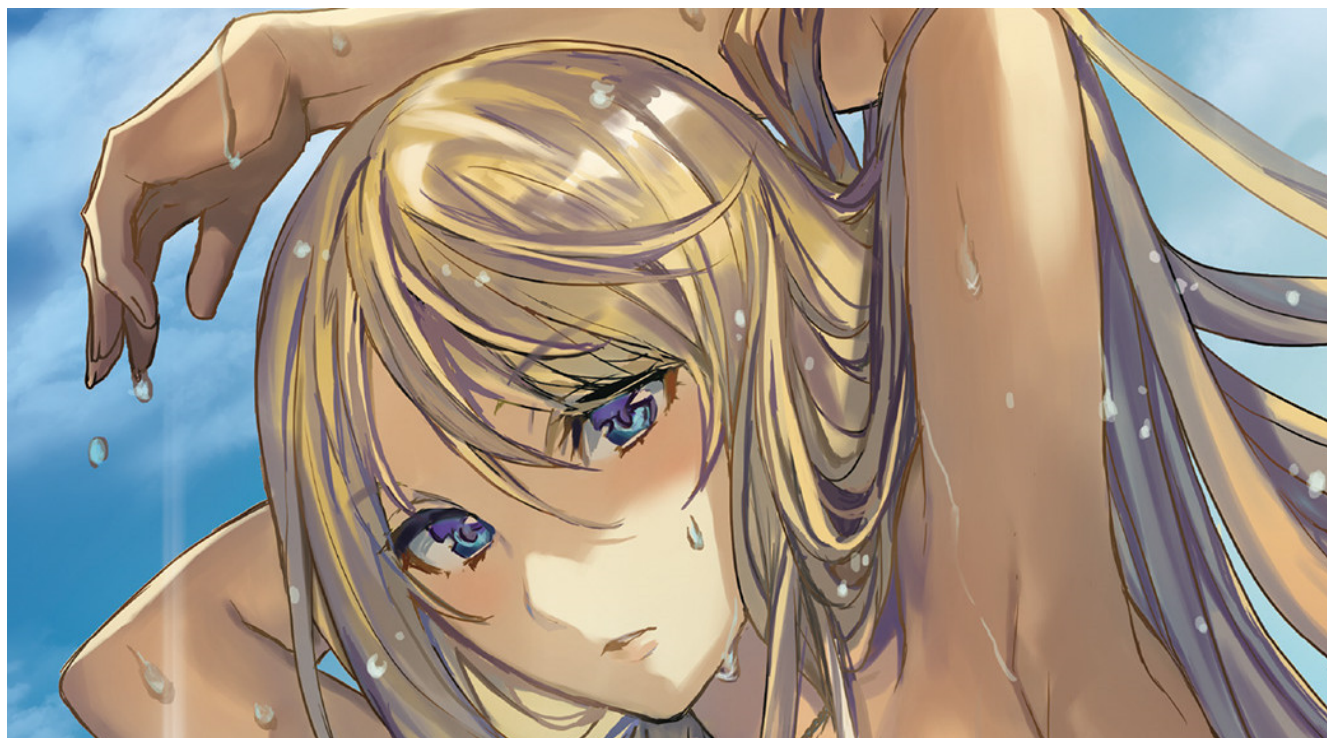
Cooking with Wild Game 異世界料理道

Volume 2

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「おい、小僧、貴様はその自慢の食事とやらを、
他の家の人間にもふるまう覚悟は
持ち合わせているか？」

ドンダールウの岩のような顔に、
獲物を見つけた肉食獣じみた笑みが広がる。

異世界料理道

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ララ＝ルウ

ルウ家の三姉。少々短気でぶっきらぼうだが、根は素直で家族思いな一面もある。

アイ＝ファ

ファ家の家長。女性ながら、家を守るために狩りをしている。
アスタのハンバーグがお気に入り。



レイナ＝ルウ

ルウ家の次姉。料理の上手い
アスタに惹かれ始めている。
真面目でおしとやかなが、
時に直情的。

ヴィナ＝ルウ

ルウ家の長姉。閉鎖的な
森辺から、外へ出たいと
願っており、外の気配がする
アスタに興味津々。

ジザ＝ルウ

ルウ家の長兄。かなり高い
戦闘力を持っており、規律
と秩序を重んじている。

ルド＝ルウ

ルウ家の末弟。無邪気で
人懐っこいが、狩人と
しての実力は一人前。

ダルム＝ルウ

ルウ家の次兄。プライドが
高く、家族以外には攻撃的。
アイ＝ファに嫁取りを
申し込んだことがある。



Prologue

One night, I had a dream after a long time.

A dream when I slept really soundly, and dreamt about things I had long forgotten.

And when I woke up, I would have no memory about them.

When I occasionally remember the scenes in my dream, it would have already ended.

In my dream, I was still a child in elementary school.

Dad watched TV as he drank beer and cheered for his favorite baseball team.

Mother cut some sort of vegetable in the kitchen, probably onions.

Our family runs a restaurant, so this must be the off day that happens once a week. If not for this, it was impossible for our entire family to be around for dinner.

It was a family scene commonly seen in Showa period dramas.

I wasn't interested in baseball, and asked Dad during the commercials:

「Dad, your culinary skill is better, but why is mother always the one cooking dinner when we are home?」

「Damn it, you——」

Dad leaned in close in a panic:

「Why are you saying this all of a sudden? What if your mother hears this?」

「That's why I'm asking so softly... Why?」

「You... Asuta, do you dislike the meal cooked by your mother?」

「No, I like it.」

The six years old me shook my head firmly.

I was a likeable child back then, even I myself thought so.

「But I like the dishes prepared by Dad more, because your food is the most delicious.」

A line that I would never say now.

Also because I have lost the person who I could compliment.

「Well... Because I'm a professional chef... My job is to cook delicious meals...」

Dad had a troubled and complicated expression. He was just past 30 back then.

He was probably wondering if he should deal out judgement with his fists after hearing my answer. But after hearing a six years old give such an answer, he stayed his hand and admit his defeat.

「By the way, you have been eating the food I cooked everyday, right? Don't you want to eat mother's home cooked meal once a week?」

「I didn't say I don't want to, I'm just curious.」

The match had started on the television.

But Dad was still facing me, with his arms crossed and troubled.

「Your thinking is still wrong. When we're home, mother should cook.」

「But why?」

「You ask me why... Because I'm a chef.」

Dad said with a stern face:

「The chef's job is to cook for customers, and cooking for a family is a mother's job.」

「Hmm...?」

I was just six and didn't fully understand the significance behind his words.

Since his words appeared in my dream in this way, that means it left an impression on me.

One year later, my mother passed away. I said in tears: 「I wish I can taste my mother's cooking a little more.」

Chapter 1 - Interlude under the Moon

Part 1

Grand Elder of Forest's Edge Jiba Wu praised my cooking, saying that it made her remember the joy of living and gave her blessings to Ai Fa and me.

I was very happy about this. Even calling this the 「best outcome」 couldn't describe what I was feeling. Grandma Jiba Wu was someone Ai Fa cherished very much. I was honored to have the chance to be present in such a moment of her life, and was deeply moved.

However—— a few hours later, I felt troubled as I stayed by myself in an empty room.

Ai Fa wasn't here.

Neither was Rimee Wu.

In this silent room, I was drowning in rage and humiliation, and rolled around in agony.

Damn it! Why does it feel like an utter defeat!?

I wasn't being held against my will. Because Ai Fa and Rimee Wu were chatting inside Jiba Wu's room, they ordered me to watch the house.

This was a house inside clan Wu's village, and the owner was supposed to be either Donda Wu's brother or nephew. Several years ago, the number of clan members decreased and their life became hard. They moved in with another family and this place became empty.

「The Fa house is far, so rest here for the night.」 We accepted the Wu Clan's hospitality gratefully—— But I was very very unhappy.

Despite that, I didn't know who I should vent my emotions to.

Strictly speaking, I was the one at fault.

I rolled around by myself in agony while harboring these unvented feelings.

A few hours earlier, we were in the hall of the Wu clan's main house.

「...Ai Fa, why don't you spend the night in the Wu village...?」

While Grandma Jiba Wu was having her meal, she asked Ai Fa.

「It's already dark outside... traveling at night is dangerous, so just rest in an empty house for tonight.」

「No, there's no need for that. We just need a fire and we won't face any danger. Just lend me a candle stand.」

「Ara ara... You have become an outstanding hunter. But for the sake of this old lady, please stay the night, Ai Fa...」

「But...」

「You must have plenty of work to do as a House head, and can't visit the Wu village often, right? I don't have the strength to walk to the Fa house anymore... In that case, at least accompany me for this night. It has been a few years since we finally get to meet again...」

Even the stubborn Ai Fa couldn't turn down this request.

I was completely fine with it. The Wu clan head Donda Wu has no intention of asking Ai Fa to marry into the Wu clan now. Hence, Ai Fa could rekindle her relationship with Grandma Jiba and Rimee Wu—— such a foolish thought sprung up in my mind.

The real problem didn't lie here.

But right after that.

Forest's Edge seemed to have the custom that they could only leave the room after everyone had finished their meal. Rimee Wu was accompanying Grandma Jiba for her meal now, while Ai Fa and I returned to our seats to eat ours.

During this time, clan head Donda Wu kept raging about my cooking.

「This is not hunter's food.」 「How dare you serve me Monta feed.」 「This corrupts my life.」 His complaints fell like the rain.

However, I think this brutish man was only tarnishing my cooking for a reason. For example, resistance towards an outsider, or his position as clan head compelled him to do so. That was why I wasn't too concerned. Grandma Jiba already gave me the best compliment possible, so I could still keep my cool and jubilant feeling.

After Ai Fa finished her meal and ate the last bit of my food, something caused a crack in my mood.

「Are you done!? Why are you demeaning Asuta's cooking so maliciously? Isn't it true that Grandma Jiba enjoyed her meal?」

Leina Wu who finished eating slightly earlier than we did shouted.

Donda Wu's blue eyes were burning as he glared impatiently at the lovely second sister of the Wu clan.

「I'm merely stating the facts, what's wrong with that? Grand Elder also said that everyone can have an opinion of what is right or wrong. This food is like the feces of Monta beasts, only old people who have lost all their teeth will eat this with gratitude.」

Leina fumed and was quiet for a short moment—— she then stood up slowly.

Then took off the tusk and horn from her necklace, and walked slowly to Ai Fa and me.

「Hey...」

A dangerous gleam came from Donda Wu's eyes, but Leina was not bothered at all. With both knees on the floor, she offered the tusk and horn to Ai Fa and me respectively.

「Wu clan's Leina Wu offer her blessing to Fa house's Ai Fa and Asuta. Thank you for saving Jiba Wu's soul and bringing serenity to the lives of the Wu clan.」

What? Hey, is this really fine, Leina Wu...?

I wanted to whisper that to her.

But before I did that, Ai Fa poked my shoulder.

「Just accept it graciously. For the denizens of Forest's Edge, the act of gifting the tusks and horns of Kiba beast is sacred. If you turn her down, you would be trampling on her dignity and pride.」

Ai Fa told me that, then accepted the white tusk after saying 「I'm honored by Leina Wu's blessing.」

I had no other choice but to mimic Ai Fa's actions and thank Leina.

「Leina... Are you trying to tarnish the Wu clan's name?」

Donda Wu said quietly. But his voice sounded deep and clear, which reminded me of the tremors before an earthquake.

「You are presenting a sham blessings to others for the sake of mocking me? Do you think I will allow you to do that...?」

Even though Leina Wu's face was green from terror, she still looked at her father with determination:

「This is no sham blessing! Even without Grandma Jiba's incident, I also think from the bottom of my heart that Asuta's cuisine is amazing, this is the first time in my life that I have tasted such delicious Kiba meat. Food is life —— Just like Grandma Jiba, I felt the joy of living very strongly.」

「Are you... insane?」

Donda Wu muttered.

I was shocked by how surprised he sounded.

Before I realized why I felt so shocked, Rimee Wu stood up with a start and said: 「Me too!」

Rimee Wu looked by at Grandma Jiba, who nodded and said: 「Don't worry.」. Rimee then left Grandma Jiba's side and ran to us.

On her childish face was her usually brilliant smile.

「Asuta! Ai Fa! Thank you very much for today! The food was very very delicious, so I want to gift you my blessings too!」

She placed the third blessing gifts —— Describing it this way might be too casual... onto my and Ai Fa's hands.

「That's right... This meal is outstanding, and worthy of my blessing.」

With an overly sexy voice, the eldest daughter Vena Wu stood up slowly.

「I learned for the first time that 『delicious food』 exist in Forest's Edge... As a denizen of Forest's Edge, I have to offer you my blessings...」

「You are absolutely right, Vena.」

Grandma Ditto Min stood up next.

「Unbelievable! What's going on!?!」

Donda Wu yelled again.

The emotions in his hoarse voice —— wasn't rage, but shock.

「Have my family gone crazy? Was Apaz poison that will make one lose his reason added into this shit-like food? But if that is so, everyone here should be mad too!」

I clasped the five tusks and horns in my hand and observed Donda Wu carefully.

Donda Wu seemed to be genuinely confused.

He really doubted the mental state of his family.

「Is there anyone who doesn't dare to stand up out of fear for my lectures? Don't hold back, just do what you want!」

After he said that, the wife of the eldest son Jiza, Sati Lei Wu planned to stand up timidly.

She was about Vena Wu's age, with her bright brown hair cut to shoulder length. A woman with a pure temperament about her.

Before she stood up, she looked her husband's way. When she saw his frank and open smile, she showed a face of relief and walked towards us.

「Wu clan's Sati Lei Wu wish to offer my blessings to Fa house's Ai Fa and her family Asuta... Thank you for your incredible meal.」

After she returned to her seat, a plump woman beside her stood up this time.

There was a bit of grey mixed into her red hair, and she had dark brown eyes that seemed deep. Her bare arms and shoulders were big and tough, and she looked like a woman in her prime who could deal with any surprises calmly.

She was Mia Lei Wu. Mother of Rimee Wu and her siblings, and also Donda Wu's wife.

「I don't really get it, but isn't it fine to express ourselves honestly when we taste delicious food? I'm so moved that my legs are turning weak.」

After glancing at her husband who was as still as a statue, she walked our way with firm footing.

Mia Lei Wu had a refreshing smile when she gifted us with a tusk and a horn.

「Your dishes are wonderful. Thank you for doing this for Grandma Jiba... Really now, why is our clan head so stubborn.」

Her smile seemed to be a representation of the phrase 「mothers are strong.」

Out of everyone present, seven of them were bored by her, which I find really impressive.

Anyway, this was the seventh blessing we received.

「... Dad, you are serious, right? Don't single me out for punishment later, alright?」

—— The youngest brother Ludo Wu said with a voice that still bore a hint of childishness and stood up.

He scratched his head of blonde hair, walked fearlessly to us and sat down crudely.

「Hey, just who exactly are you? I heard there is a group hailing from the Eastern kingdom who seems to be sorcerers. Did you use magic to turn kiba meat delicious?」

「This isn't magic, I just used kitchen knife... knives and fire. It's just a skillset.」

Ai Fa was silent, and this was obviously a question directed at me, so I answered him like this.

After grunting disinterestedly, he turned his pale eyes towards Ai Fa and said:

「Fa house's Ai Fa, you have turned into a good woman. It's a pity, if you are more feminine, I don't mind marrying you even if you can't be wed to my brother.」

「.....」

「Never mind. What they said isn't an exaggeration, this is a delicious meal. Frankly speaking, just the thought of having to drink that never changing poitan soup from tomorrow onwards makes me feel like crying. If you are not Ai Fa's husband, then marry into our family.」

「T-That's fine, the woman of your family have the rights to choose their spouse too.」

「Hmmp, aside from that brat Rimee, pick anyone you like.」

Ludo said this last part quietly, then removed his necklace. He had lots of spoils of war, and was on par with Ai Fa.

「Dinner is absolutely delicious, so I want to gift you my blessing. This is the first time I am doing this, so be grateful.」

When the arrogant youngest brother returned to his seat, there was a strange silence in the hall.

「... Anyone else?」

Donda Wu stroked his beard as he swept his gaze across the hall.

「So only three other person feels that this is not fit for human consumption.」

「I don't think the dish is that bad, don't judge everything by your own standards.」

The third sister Lala Wu said unhappily.

Lala Wu had her red hair tied up at the top of her head, and her arrogant personality was on par with the youngest brother. Amongst the seven siblings each with their unique personalities, only the third sister and youngest brother seemed a little similar in appearance and temperament. She should be younger than Ludo Wu, and was at most twelve or thirteen years old.

「I think the grilled poitan and kiba meat soup are good, but the kiba meat that should be the main dish was gooey and look disgusting, so I don't feel it's good enough for me to gift my blessing... To be honest, just what they did for Grandma Jiba is already worthy of my blessing. But everyone seemed to think this thing is delicious, so I didn't do so.」

「I see... Darum, what do you think?」

「I have nothing to say.」

The second brother whose style seemed as sharp as a wild wolf refused to comment.

「Hmmp, what about you, Jiza?」

「.....Clan head Donda, please don't mind it. No matter how the appearance of the food is like or how they taste, kiba will still be kiba, and poitan will still be poitan. No matter how much effort is put into it, they are the same once they are eaten.」

「You don't need to tell me that now!」



A fire was burning in the eyes of the clan head.

The eldest brother looked at his father with slit like eyes, and smiled with ease.

「Are you asking me if it is tasty? Just like what Lala said, I never imagined there is such a way to eat poitan, which surprised me. The soup didn't have the stink of the kiba, but I could feel the life of the kiba clearly from it... But the kiba meat with red sauce on it is too soft, I didn't feel like I was eating kiba at all. If I eat this meat everyday, it feels like my teeth will gradually lose their strength, which gives me the chills.」

「Yes—— That's exactly it! That's why I think this isn't food fit for the hunters of Forest's Edge!」

Donda Wu had an enlightened look, and life crept back into his face.

「My teeth exist for the sake of tearing through tough kiba meat! Just like my arms that hunt kiba, and my legs that allow me to sprint in the forest, my teeth are one of my survival tools in Forest's Edge! If I don't use my tools often, they will rust. The food you serve me is an inferior meal that will corrode my life!」

「That's...」

I wanted to refute, but Ai Fa quietly grabbed my arm.

Her steady blue eyes were telling me to shut up.

「And since I'm a man of Forest's Edge, a hunter of Forest's Edge, this food is harmful to me... But for toothless elders, this is the best meal.」

An arrogant smile slowly returned to Donda Wu's face. He turned to the old woman and said:

「My grandmother, and the Grand Elder Jiba Wu, what you said is right. Since this food rekindled your spirit, I will take back what I said. This isn't the feed of monta beast, this dish saved my beloved grandmother who had lived the longest in Forest's Edge, and had contributed generously her entire life, this dish is a medicine! It's a treasure!」

「Hmmp... clan head Donda, you are more forthright than usual...」

「I'm always this forthright! Right is right, and when I'm wrong, I will admit it! If I don't have this resolve, I won't be able to take on the role of clan head.」

He turned his fierce eyes towards Ai Fa and me, then said:

「Ai Fa of house Fa, and family member Asuta! You have saved the Grand Elder of clan Wu, Jiba Wu! As the head of clan Wu, I apologized for my earlier rude actions, and I offer you my thanks once again!」

Ai Fa acknowledged the other party with her gaze.

As the feelings in my heart gradually turned clear, I was at a lost on what to do, and stared right at Donda Wu.

Donda Wu had a cheerful smile on his face.

He had a refreshing face, as if he had finally figured out doubts that had haunted him for years.

「Your cooking is poison to us, but good medicine for the Grand Elder. Just eating this poison for one night won't corrode our souls, so I won't hold you accountable for serving me poison. The tusks and horns you obtained are blessings you rightfully earned. You don't need to feel bad about it, so utilize them fairly to become your flesh and blood!」

Part 2

Back to the present.

After telling me to 「sleep first」, Ai Fa went to Grandma Jiba's room, while I spent the night by myself. I laid in the large open room and annoyedly hugged my head.

How dare he say my cooking is poison! That damn kiba old man... showing such a smirk face by himself!

Donda Wu probably felt uneasy when he saw his family present us with their blessings one after another. He was suspicious of his family's mental well being—— or if he was the one who had gone mad.

After hearing what the eldest brother Jiza said, he finally understood why his family acted this way. Like what Grandma Jiba said in the beginning, 「everyone has their own interpretation of what is delicious.」.

And so, he understood that his family didn't go mad and was relieved.

However—— That meant he really thinks that the 『Kiba Hamburg Steak』 was unpalatable.

Everyone has different taste! Some people just hate Hamburg Steak. And that meal is meant for Grandma Jiba whose teeth aren't good in the first place!

That's what I thought.

However, I was the one who decided on hamburg steak for dinner.

After Ai Fa and Rimee Wu gave raving reviews for the hamburg steak, I selected hamburg steak as the main course without hesitation—— and served up this other worldly dish in Forest's Edge as if this was only natural.

If I put more care to consider the content of the meal, then I should serve other types of meal other than hamburg steak. And so, I was the one at fault.

But, even so——

Even so, was my cooking that terrible?

Compared to the kiba hotpot which the denizens of Forest's Edge usually ate—— made from kiba without bloodletting and gooey poitan soup, was my cooking really that bad?

That must be the reason why I felt so defeated.

Was I too arrogant to think that way?

Was there something wrong with my attitude to feel a sense of defeat because of this?

As I gritted my teeth and placed my hand onto my chest, the necklace Rimee Wu made for me —— which chained eight tusks and horns together made a pleasant clinking sound.

This necklace was the first wages I obtained in this different world.

Out of twelve people, eight thought my cooking was 「delicious」, which means I should be proud of myself. I didn't want to exchange these tusks and horns for poitan or aria, but maybe letting it become part of my flesh and blood is the right way of using it. But I think it will be some time before I can resolve myself to do so.

This was evidence that the other party acknowledged my existence.

They think there was value in my existence.

I was overjoyed.

I was proud.

I could live on in this different world —— I felt that I have been given permission by them.

However, my work had also been refuted.

It made me so mad.

I was filled with regret.

As if my entire existence had been denied.

「Everyone have different taste」, this normal reasoning couldn't liberate me from my depressed mood.

Furthermore, I didn't settle the matter of Grandma Jiba's meal adequately too.

I taught the women of clan Wu how to make minced meat. They could continue to make easy to chew meals for Grandma Jiba who had weak teeth.

However, I didn't teach them about bloodletting, so they couldn't improve the taste of the food.

And this had to be done right after capturing a kiba, or there would be no meaning in doing this. So this wasn't the job of the women, but the men.

Judging from the current situation, Donda Wu had no intention of learning this technique.

In this sense, I also messed up—— I had completely lost.

I wasn't thorough enough in my thinking.

But, what else should I have done——?

While I was thinking about that...

Knock knock knock—— Someone knocked the door three times.

「I'm here, please come in.」

I thought that was probably Ai Fa. But would she even knock?

By the way, so the action of knocking exists in this world. I learned about this for the first time.

Which means, that might not be Ai Fa.

「I didn't bar the door, please come in.」

I had no choice but to stand up as I said that.

Who could it be? While I was thinking about that, Leina Wu's innocent smile appeared in my mind.

The second sister of the Wu clan who had a head of lustrous black hair looked at me with eyes of admiration during dinner preparation and after we finished our work. My relationship with everyone else was still shallow, so I couldn't think of anyone who might visit except for her.

However, she had a cute face, great figure and was dressed in an enticing outfit. I was hesitant about meeting such a girl alone so late into the night —— and opened the door slowly with a groan.

However——

「S-Strange? It's you?」

The one standing outside the door wasn't Leina Wu, but in a certain sense, someone much more dangerous.

「Thank you for opening the door for me... I'm really glad, Asuta...」

I knew who that was just by listening to this sexy voice.

From the small gap of the open door, a body so good that it borders on foul play slipped into the room.

「W-Why are you here, Vena Wu——?」

I thought about adding 「Miss」, but stopped myself. In this world there didn't seem to be a custom of adding honorifics.

「I wanted to see you, Asuta... I have something to ask you...」

「You have a question for me?」

Vena looked at me with a teasing and flirty gaze, then took off her leather shoes that was simpler in design than the men's. I didn't give her any permission, but she was already bent on entering my room.

「Great, Leina didn't come before me. I was so worried, wondering what should I do if you were busy...」

「L-Leina Wu has no reason to visit me, right? I only cooked a meal together with her once.」

And my relationship with you is even shallower! That was what my answer was implying, but Vena Wu simply laughed flirtatiously.

「Fufu, you have completely captivated that child's heart. Do you really not know? Asuta, you are really dense...」

「No, what I'm saying is...」

「Don't worry. I'm not here to persuade you to marry into my clan... Anyway, let's sit down and talk...?」

Her body shape was just right, with adequate muscles and the right amount of fats on top of the muscle. Her right hand which was nice to look at and serve practical use smoothly wrap around my left arm.

WARNING, WARNING, an alarm sounded off in my head.

Anyway, this woman was letting out an excessive amount of feminine charm. Her limbs were filled with sexiness, and her body had serious curves. Just describing one of her arms would require a bunch of unnecessary terms to quantify it. I could only close my eyes to keep my sanity. Her entire existence was like pheromones itself.

She narrowed her eyes sleepily, her pink lips seemed to have just the right amount of volume to them. Her oval and smooth face, slender neck and clear collar lines with her long brown hair

flowing down her tender right shoulder —— at such a close distance, I couldn't shift my gaze down from her upper body. I felt that I would be done for if I did that.

「...Let's sit down.」

She said again, and pulled me into the room.

As expected of a denizen of Forest's Edge who performed hard labor every day, she was really strong. If I resisted, my left arm grabbed by her might touch a dangerous part of her body, so I could only go along with her.

She stopped right by the window where the candle was lit, and her center of gravity shifted down smoothly.

Because of the reasons I described earlier, I could only follow suit—— In the end, I found out that my worries were in vain.

As I leaned onto the wall and sat down, Vena pushed her body onto me as if she couldn't wait any longer.

「Erm, hey, wait!」

After shouting needlessly, her beautiful finger that was like a piece of art rested on my lips softly:

「Quiet... I don't want my family to hear what I'm about to say next...」

Light breathing entered my ears with these words, which was enough for me to break into goosebumps. And it wasn't because this was unpleasant, but the opposite.

But no matter how I felt, I wasn't acting out of my own will, but was being forced by the other party. This filled me with an emotion akin to fear. In the dim light, a big sister who was the personification of sexiness and pheromones leaned in on me and blew air into my ears—— The remnants of my sensible side just felt that this experience was terrifying.

Ahh—— did she smoked kiba meat during the day?

This sudden thought flashed across my mind, as if I was escaping reality.

Actually, this was trivial and not worth mentioning. I only thought about this because the fragrance from Vena Wu's hair and body was entering my nasal cavity. There was the refreshing smell on lilo and the sweet but stinging scent of pico leaves.

Smell nice... but something is lacking...

As I was thinking about this, a pair of burning cat-like eyes seemed to be staring at me in my mind.

My sensible side was on the verge of breaking down, but my sense of tension picked up all of a sudden.

I didn't know when will Ai Fa be back. In such a situation, I couldn't be so relaxed.

「What do you want to ask me? Since you don't want your family to know, is it something dangerous?」

「Yes... I'm here to ask you something dangerous...」

She kept her left arm behind her body, and she placed something onto the floor with a thud.

It was a bottle of fruit wine.

I could smell a fragrance from Vena Wu, which was also mixed with the sweet scent of fruit wine.

「Sorry, I'm a little dizzy... I value my family very much... If I don't drink, I won't be able to muster the courage...」

「W-What are you saying? I don't want to get into any trouble.」

It seemed safer to make her think I'm an unreliable man.

But Vena Wu shook her head slowly, and rested her head onto my shoulder.

「Asuta... Just who are you...?」

「—— What do you mean?」

「We often visit the Genos post station town, so we are used to foreigners... But your cooking is incredible... I tasted what happiness tasted like and felt like I have been reborn...」

So she wanted to ask about cooking. I didn't mind, but I wish she could keep an adequate distance away. I managed to recover my reason, and the dangerous sensation pressing on my left arm was making my rational side scream.

「You said so before, right? You don't know about the western kingdom and never even heard about the Amusehorn continent...? You are not from this land, but a faraway nation, right...? Just what kind of country is that...?」

「I-I don't know. I come from an island nation, so it should be on the other end of the ocean. But since I don't even know the name of this continent, naturally, I can't find my way back!」



「Island nation... an island nation where...? ...That's wonderful...」

Vena Wu's warm finger tip pushed against my chest.

I felt a chill run through my body.

「Asuta... Will you take me back to your incredible home town...?」

After she said that—— Vena Wu started to entangle her body onto mine, like a giant Madarama snake.

Part 3

「Wait, Miss Vena Wu...!」

I was so frantic that I unconsciously added in honorifics.

During this time, her smooth skin was wrapped around my body.

Her body was soft and tender, and huge strength was hidden within her lovely body.

「Please don't marry into the Wu clan... Leina is a cute girl, but I'm not that bad either...right?」

No, this is bad! But on a completely different level!

She pushed me down onto the rug and groped my entire body. She didn't use her fingers, but grind her entire body against mine. The soft but crude sensation feels as though my entire body was going to shatter.

Something that felt like fear kept me from feeling my back muscles.

At the same time, a strong feeling that was totally different from fear engulfed me.

My heart was beating so hard that it hurts, and I couldn't catch my breath.

A sweet scent that differs from that of herbs gradually numbed my brain cells.

At this moment, I was like a lighter, swimming casually in liquid fuel.

Once the fire spreads—— I will lose myself.

「As a woman of the Wu clan, I had to meet all sorts of men for matchmaking... But I dumped them all... Because if I take someone into the Wu clan as my husband, or marry off to be someone's wife, I won't be able to leave Forest's Edge forever...」

Each word she said brushed against my neck with her hot breath.

「I don't want to spend my entire life here... After eating your dish, my feelings are the complete opposite of Grandma Jiba... After tasting your cooking, it feels like there is another world out there. I want to visit that world... I want to go to your world with you...」

The sensation of the scorching heat slowly moved away from me?.

Vena Wu pushed herself up.

She was making the preparation to head for her goal.

「Let me be yours... and you be mine...?」

While illuminated by the orange light of the candle, Vena Wu reached for the cloth wrapped around her chest.

My rational side that had almost vaporized gathered once again, and I grabbed her wrist from below.

「You can't! It's a taboo for unwed women to bare their body, right? You can't do that.」

Her pale brown eyes stared right at me.

Her eyes reflected the wavering flame... and was filled with tears.

I couldn't tell if she was really on the verge of tears. But Vena Wu didn't shake off my fingers or open her mouth, and just looked at me quietly——

Then, she finally moved away from my body.

「... Was my charm lacking...?」

She sat down slanted to one side, half her back facing me and her gaze on the ground.

I slowly got up and answered: 「I think this has nothing to do with charm.」

「I don't even know why or how I came to this unfamiliar place. Maybe I'm just retarded and all this is just my imagination. In this situation, I can't... make a promise I don't know whether I can fulfill, or get into a relationship with others.」

「... So you have no intention of marrying Ai Fa...?」

My heart that had finally calmed itself started racing again because of a strange feeling.

This night wasn't good for my heart.

「How should I put this, I don't really know either. But she is very important to me.」

「You are so honest... this is like asking me to die...」

「I-I don't mean that.」

「Is that so... But in Forest's Edge, women who haven't wed by 20 either have a nasty personality, or are harmful to their family...」

She pulled at the rug with angry fingers.

「I have been holding on to my chastity and even endured curious eyes. But when I want to give it up, you rejected me so coldly, I really feel like killing myself...」

「E-Erm, Vena Wu...?」

「If you really marry Leina, I might really kill the two of you...」

While Vena Wu said something horrifying so easily, she stood up with her fruit wine bottle in hand.

「If you take Ai Fa as your wife, what should I do... I might be killed if I made an enemy out of that girl... The best way to obtain happiness will be to entice you, and die together with you...」

「No, like I said...」

「Knocking three times and asking the other party out is an old tradition, which means setting a wedding engagement with each other...」

Vena Wu took smooth strides towards the entrance.

「To accept, you let the visitor in, if not, you turn her down directly. That's the custom of Forest's Edge...」

She put on her shoes and opened the door. With half of her body leaning outside, she turned her face sideways towards me:

「You accepted me, so I won't give up... Sweet dreams, Asuta, don't forget our promise.」

She closed the door gently and the room turned quiet once again.

I collapsed onto the ground tiredly.

「Ah, really now, why is the elder sister the one who came!? I don't understand her personality at all! I really wish she can give me a break...」

I had my fill of kiba just now, but the calories from that seemed to have been completely taken away.

While lying sprawl on the rug, I shook my head that still had some lingering lewd thoughts and snap back to my senses.

Now is not the time to indulge in relationships! My pride as a chef has been shattered...!

As I tried to steer my thoughts in the right direction——

Someone knocked on the wall.

What is it now!?

I took heed from the lesson earlier, and merely answered in my heart.

However, the sound came from the wall instead of the door.

It was the wall opposite me, away from the candle stand.

Since knocking the door three times was a code for wedding engagement, what did knocking the wall once mean? A signal for me to bring food over? Or some sort of protest against us getting too intimate?

No matter what, someone was knocking on the wall of this building. The cook house was behind, so they couldn't have mistaken this. Someone had knocked his hand or feet on the wall. Was there some meaning behind this action?

Darkness engulfed the world outside the window, and I couldn't see anyone.

Forget it! If you have business with me, sound out! Sound out!

I laid sprawled onto the ground once more.

After that, there wasn't anymore sound from the door or the wall, and the serenity of the night returned to the room.

The next moment—— soft speaking sound could be heard.

Someone was definitely out there.

I couldn't hear the content, but it sounded like an argument.

It was a man and a woman.

Did someone saw Vena Wu exit from here and was questioning her?

If that was so, there was more reason for me to not get involved. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. The candle was still lit, Ai Fa will take care of it when she comes back.

Speaking of which, Ai Fa sure is slow...

For the denizens of Forest's Edge, this was already late into the night. Grandma Jiba's body is frail, so they shouldn't push her too much. Or was Grandma Jiba the one stopping Ai Fa from leaving? As I thought about that, I drifted off into my dreams——

I suddenly sat up with a start.

I realized that might be Ai Fa's voice.

I don't think anyone will take a stroll in the middle of the night. But if someone laid in wait here for Ai Fa to return from the Wu main house, then everything fits.

After this thought arose in my heart, I didn't think I could sleep if I didn't check personally.

After all, the voice outside was obviously a man and a woman arguing.

I will just take a peek. If it's not Ai Fa, then see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

After making up my mind, I walked towards the entrance.

I quietly opened the door, and slipped out under the moonlight.

The voices came from the left side of the building where the Wu main house was.

I sneakily made my way to the wall on the left.

I peeked in the direction of the voices—— And the person was indeed Ai Fa.

She had her back to the wall, arms crossed over her chest and glared fiercely at the person facing her.

Opposite her was the second brother of the Wu clan, Darum Wu.

With eyes were just like his father, he was a handsome man like a young wolf—— He was leaning with one hand on the wall, looking down at Ai Fa's face from up high.

So that sound just now was his katedon¹.

Ai Fa was just shy of 170cm, but that guy was about 180cm tall, taller than her by half a head. Even so, Ai Fa showed no fear and glared at the other party coldly. That guy had a smile on his face.

It wasn't a gentle smile, but one of mockery.

The cold man who was usually expressionless was smiling mockingly at Ai Fa.

「... Ai Fa, everyone just think it's amusing that a woman like you is pretending to be a hunter.」

I could hear his faint voice.

「Everyone is laughing at you, saying a girl has been possessed by the dead spirit of her father, wearing kiba fur and pretending to be a hunter... Hey, why are you alienating the Wu clan?」

「.....」

「You're just lucky that this couple of years went well, but such a life won't last long. If you look for someone to rely on now, you can live the rest of your life comfortably. No one will care about you if you become an old woman...」

1 <http://tokyogirlsupdate.com/kabe-don-cafe-experience-20141130159.html>

Heated emotions squirmed in my heart. If his face gets 1cm closer to Ai Fa, I will speak up and stop him. After I made this decision, I managed to suppress the feelings in my heart.

A powerless man like me would just get in her way if I tried to help. I knew this very well, so don't get any closer to her, damn it.

「Could it be... you didn't resist the eldest son of the Tsun clan that night? That's why you are reluctant to give up on that fool, and can't bring yourself to marry others...」

「Hey, your delusions has gone too far!」

When I came back to my senses, I had already lashed out at him.

Darum Wu didn't move at all.

But I couldn't stay silent.

「Asuta, what are you doing?」

Ai Fa looked at me coldly.

「Go on home stupid, didn't I tell you to sleep first?」

Ai Fa's reaction was just as expected.

As for that man——

He treated me like a pebble on the roadside, just glancing my way once before turning back to Ai Fa.

「Ai Fa, if I'm not wrong, then just tell me honestly. No matter what, I won't sympathize with that guy's used goods. But if you really...」

「That guy is just a wimp, there's no way Ai Fa would let him get his way! Are you blind? Or are you taunting Ai Fa? Are you wooing her? Or picking a fight? If you don't make yourself clear, Ai Fa won't know how to react too!」

「—— You monta, don't talk with a tone of a man. If you can only tend hearths, then just shut up and keep cooking your food.」

He didn't even look at me and said all that as if I was an annoyance.

I took a few steps their way.

「Are you referring to me when you say monta? I have never seen that animal before, so I won't get mad even if you describe me as such. Enough, just leave. Can't you tell that Ai Fa is troubled even though you are so close to her?」

Darum Wu twisted his lips coldly and leaned even closer towards Ai Fa.

So close that their nose were almost touching.

My agitated emotions turned into words, and spat out from my mouth:

「Hey! Then let me tell it to you straight! Since all you can do is hunt, then shut your mouth and hunt your kiba! Don't pretend to be almighty and woo girls!」

Darum Wu turned expressionless.

His hand left the wall, and his balance that was leaning forward was straightened.

And then—— His fingers reached for the knife on his waist.

「Monta, are you making a fool of the hunters of Forest's Edge?」

「I'm not making a fool out of you all! You asked me to keep cooking my food, are you mocking me then? That's right, I will tend to the hearth! That's my job. If you can't handle this job, then don't go around wooing girls!」

「Why you...」

「Right now, I'm tending to the hearth in Ai Fa's house. But until six days ago, Ai Fa was the one tending to the hearth! She hunts kiba and tends to the hearth by herself! She completed the task for both a man and a woman by herself, can you do that?」

I punched at the wall that was innocent.

「If you can't, then don't mock her!」

「Monta. Are you... taunting the Wu clan...?」

His words lacked anger and was filled as if he was dumbfounded instead.

「I'm not complaining about the Wu clan or the people of Forest's Edge, I'm saying this to you alone, Darum Wu. Ai Fa is my benefactor, so you can't be so insolent towards her.」

「... Enough Asuta, you can shut up now.」

After saying that resignedly in a quiet voice, Ai Fa's back moved away from the wall.

She uncrossed her arms, walked past Darum Wu who was clutching the hilt of his knife and came to me.

「Wait, Ai Fa! I'm not done yet...!」 Darum Wu said.

「I already understand very well. No matter what you say, my answer remains the same.」

Ai Fa stood beside me and acknowledge the other party with her usual stiff face and clear eyes.

「I'm honored by your proposal again. But I have decided to live as a hunter, so I can't marry into the Wu clan.」

「You...」

「Also, going by the rules, the head of both house should decide on any marriage. I'm the head of the Fa house, but the head of the Wu clan is Donda Wu. If you wish to propose in the future, please do so together with your clan head... I will bid my leave.」

Ai Fa grabbed my arm and left in wide strides as if she was dragging me along.

Darum maintained the same position as his body shook and he stared into the air.

「Hey, is it fine to leave him like this?」

Ai Fa didn't answer, she advanced along the wall, turned around the corner and shoved me into the open door. She then went in, shut the door and put up the bar lock. She was finally ready to lecture me.

「You moron! Why did you push that kind of small fry to the edge!? What are you going to do if he comes at you with his knife!? I'm a guest, and don't have my knife with me!」

「Because he is too unreasonable...」

「He is spouting nonsense, so just ignore him! Without permission from his clan head, he doesn't have the guts to do anything dumb! But you incited him...」

Ai Fa pushed me onto the door and grabbed my chest hard.

The furious Ai Fa leaned in close to me, our distance was similar to how she and Darum Wu was just now.

Ai Fa's scent that was a mixture of sweet fruit, refreshing herb and delicious meat entered my nose—— and my heart started to race.

It seemed that Vena Wu's impact on me had yet to subside. I have to snap back to my senses, this was too dangerous.

Ai Fa didn't understand my worries at all, her strong eyes stared right at me.

「... When I heard you say 『shut your mouth and hunt your kiba』, I really felt like punching you, Asuta.」

「D-Did you hear what I said completely? I'm trying to say that all jobs are equally important.」

「If I didn't, I would have punched you.」

Ai Fa suddenly pulled away. Her fingers grabbing my chest had shifted to my right hand.

She grasped my hand tightly, and pulled it to about chest level.

After punching the wall just now, my hand was a little red.

「... Your hands exist for the sake of tending hearth fire, correct?」

She gently covered my palm with her other hand.

「If you hurt your hand and that stopped you from working, what will you do? Don't be rash... This pair of hands saved Grandma Jiba after all.」

The anger gradually faded from Ai Fa's voice.

She held my right hand with both of her hands and looked up slightly at me.

「Asuta, even though this is temporary, you are still a member of the Fa house.」

「Hmm? Of course. I'm the guest member tending to the Fa house's hearth.」

My right hand felt really warm.

As if Ai Fa's body warmth was injected into my body through her hands—— This incredible feeling felt really comfortable. Even though I felt a chill on my back when Vena Wu was on top of me, Ai Fa's warmth calmed me down.

Ai Fa held my hand, looked into my eyes and said softly:

「That's why I didn't offer you my blessing. As a family, we can't gift our blessings so easily... But you saved Grandma Jiba's soul, as well as Rimee Wu and me.」

「Yes, I'm glad I was of help.」

「I'm very grateful, but I can't give you any tangible reward—— However, I hope you can believe that's how I really feel.」

We were some distance from the candle stand, so the light was dim and I can't see Ai Fa's expression clearly.

But her bright blue eyes and quiet words were warmer and gentler than usual, but had Ai Fa's unique strength in them at the same time.

That warm, gentle and strong feeling was injected into my body alongside her body warmth, and slowly satiate my heart.

「I believe you. I'm very happy to hear you say that.」

I said this naturally.

Ai Fa gripped my hand tightly one last time before slowly letting go.

「... These hands saved the Grand Elder of Forest's Edge, so don't hurt them because of that foolish man. In that sense, you are still a half-baked guy.」

「Of course, I'm a proper half-baked guy! That's why I need to work harder.」

I smiled brilliantly, but when I recalled the green face Darum Wu made at the very end, I started to worry.

「Hey, was I being a busybody? Did I make him angry unnecessarily?」

「... You are a busybody a lot of the times, and does plenty of unnecessary things too. But what you said isn't wrong, that's why that man's face turned green and he couldn't say anything.」

Ai Fa lowered her eyes slightly, her gaze turned my way through her long lashes.

「But... I had been listening to him nag about these boring matters all this while, and felt better after seeing what you did.」

「I see, then my actions aren't a complete waste.」

Ai Fa snorted, then reverted to her usual self and started taking her string-tied shoes off.

She asked as she took off her shoe.

「By the way, why was the eldest daughter of the Wu clan here?」

「... What?」

I tilted my head and cold sweat covered my back.

「When I came back, that woman just left the room. I wanted to speak with her, but that second brother suddenly pulled me to the shadows, so she didn't notice that I was there.」

She kept her waist bent and started taking off the other shoe.

I watched the back of her beautiful blonde head and could only squeeze out the words 「I see.」

「Well, I don't really know why she was here, she seemed to be drunk.」

「I see, she really did have a fruit wine bottle in hand.」

Ai Fa finally took off both shoes and stood up slowly.

She then put her hand heavily onto my shoulder.

「Then, what did she mean by 『promise』 just before she left?」

Reflected in Ai Fa's beautiful blue eyes was a figure of a pitiful youth whose face was twisted from surprise.

And the day ended on a happy note—— let's pretend that's what happened.

Chapter 2 - Where is the Signpost?

Part 1

The next morning

I opened my eyes, but couldn't find Ai Fa.

The clan Wu vacant house we were staying in was twice the size of Ai Fa's place and was grand and spacious. The floor was laid with rug, and we slept on the floor as usual. But Ai Fa was nowhere to be found.

「Hmm? ... Where did Ai Fa go?」

I got up anxiously and knocked the doors in the house.

I checked the rooms, and still couldn't find her. All the rooms were empty.

Where did she go?

I felt uneasy.

Did that second brother come to find trouble with her again?

I couldn't sit still with that thought in mind.

I grabbed the white towel I took off before I turned in, and hurried to the entrance.

The bar lock had been removed.

... Which means, she left out of her own will.

The sun had just risen over the hills.

Normally, we would have washed our clothes by this time. But as we were staying here as guests today, we escaped the hassle of doing house chores for the time being. I got even more confused on why Ai Fa left.

Outside the house was an empty plaza surrounded by seven houses. I walked there and looked around me.

Inside the plaza, a stout woman was carrying an iron pot, an old lady was drying pico leaves on a large piece of cloth, and a group of young children was either helping or getting in their way.

Each family was getting on with their morning chores, but there wasn't anyone in the Wu clan main house situated at the deepest end. I didn't see Ai Fa here either.

However —— judging from the atmosphere here, it didn't seem like anyone had taken Ai Fa away by force. With such a serene scene before me, I felt stupid for holding such dangerous delusions.

In that case, what is going on? Did she leave me here and went back by herself?

I couldn't string together a cohesive statement about that incident with Vena Wu last night,

In the end, I insisted on the point that 「she was drunk and I wasn't sure what she said」, so Ai Fa shouldn't be mad about this. Even though Ai Fa was suspicious and cold towards me, I didn't think she was angry enough to just leave me here.

Or was she actually that angry?

I had a guilty conscience because I was hiding things from Ai Fa. Did she see through me?

Sigh, if I knew I would be so troubled, I shouldn't have kept her in the dark. I should confess everything—— no, I should change some slight detail—— and report all of it to her!

... No matter what, I think I'm panicking too much?

I was like a toddler separated from my parents.

However, it was true that I felt more uneasy from such a situation in this different world.

Oh... Speaking of which, last night was the first time I acted separately from Ai Fa.

If I included the times I watched the house, we often acted separately. However, I promised Ai Fa that I would 「only act under her supervision」, so I had never wandered around outside by myself.

And even if we were apart, we didn't have anyone else to interact with aside from each other. We spent five days in this small world where we only had each other.

But Rimee Wu appeared and destroyed this balance.

After the balance broke, it led to this incident.

Vena Wu proposed to me, and Darum Wu wooed Ai Fa.

This must be fate.

... Wait, now wasn't the time to talk to myself!

I had to find where Ai Fa had gone.

Anyway, I had to visit the Wu main house.

But if Ai Fa had bid them farewell and went on home, then I could only chase after her in tears.

「... Yo, why are you standing there by yourself, guest?」

When I was about to take a step forward, someone called out to me from behind.

I turned back and a blonde youth was looking at me confusedly.

That was the youngest brother of the Wu clan, Ludo Wu.

「Ah hello... you too young chap, what are you doing here?」

I was in the Wu main house which was in the innermost part of the plaza. Since he was standing behind me, that means he came from the outer part of the village.

「Hmm? For some reason, I got up really early tonight, so I strolled around aimlessly. If the women finds me, they will nag and ask me to help.」

Ludo Wu gave a big yawn after answering.

My height was exactly 170cm. This youth was shorter and thinner than me, and had a cute appearance.

And of course, he might be slender, but didn't look weak at all. He was like a young deer, swift and nimble.

His round eyes had a tenacious light about them, and his expression always seem fearless.

「The women's job should be done by women. They kept ordering me around just because I'm the youngest man... So, what are you doing guest? You're Asuta, right?」

「Well, Ai Fa was gone when I woke up, so I came out to find her. Young chap, have you seen her?」

「Don't know, she is probably helping the women with chores. They should be doing the laundry at the water source at this time... This way, follow me.」

Ludo Wu walked towards the Wu main house with brisk strides.

Although he spoke in a casual tone, his nature might be unexpectedly kind. Out of the Wu men with unique personalities, this youth felt the most righteous, and he was the only one who acknowledge my cooking.

「Are you two really going back today? What a shame, I want to eat more delicious meals.」

His words filled me with joy. My affection for him kept rising.

「I have taught the cooking method to the women of your clan. They will definitely cook delicious meals for you even if I wasn't here.」

「The women of my clan aren't that skilled! And dad won't permit them to make that 『hamburg steak』 dish. Even if they do cook a delicious meal, only Grandma Jiba will get to taste it.」

He looked at me with eyes of dissatisfaction.

「Asuta, you really don't want to marry into our clan? Whether it's Vena-nee or Leina-nee, just pick one and devour her.」

「Aren't you their brother? You actually said something so scary... young chap, are you fine with your important sisters being treated so badly?」

「They will marry sooner or later, so it's the same anyway. And instead of marrying away from the family, they can stay in the Wu clan forever if they take in a husband. So doing this will be better.」

Hmm, looks like he really care about his sisters. But as someone from a different world, I find it hard to understand his thinking. If a man laid his hands on the sister he treasured so much, could this really respect and treat that man as his brother-in-law?

「Leina-nee is already seventeen and Vena-nee is already twenty. The people around us are really noisy, asking why the women of the Wu main house has yet to wed at their age. They want them to marry soon, increase our clan members and nurture the next generation. That's an important task of women too, right?」

「Right. By the way, how old are you young chap?」

「I'm fifteen. Finally old enough to get a wife... And can you stop calling me 『young chap』? It gives me goosebumps.」

「Sorry about that. Ah, is the water source that way?」

「This way.」

What a friendly youth.

Aside from the third sister Lala Wu, I have spoken with every other member of the Wu clan now. The personalities of the siblings in this family varies very widely.

The intimidating eldest brother Jiza Wu, whose personality was hard to figure out.

Like a feral wolf with dangerous eyes, the second brother Darum Wu.

The youngest brother who seemed wild but was actually cheerful.

Vena Wu, the eldest sister overwhelming with sexiness.

The pure and serious second sister, Leina Wu.

The only woman who refuted my 『kiba steak』, Lala Wu.

The innocent and cute Rimee Wu.

This family had all sorts of personality.

I was really curious about how one couple could give birth to children that were so different in character.

「You don't intend to marry into our clan? In that case, I just have to help you entice Leina-nee and the others.」

We passed by the houses and walked down the path to the right where there were more trees.

「Or maybe you can barge in while Leina-nee is bathing. You know about that weird rule, right? If a man saw the naked body of an unwed woman, they will need to take her as his wife, or be rendered blind. Leina-nee actually has a weak personality, and she will definitely split hairs and think she has to marry you.」

「I don't want Leina Wu to split hairs over this! I think I will just be blinded for this anyway.」

「Instead of assaulting and impregnating her, this will be simpler, right? 」

「I think your precondition is already wrong... Ludo Wu, you should really think seriously about what you need to do to bring happiness to your sisters.」

「But this is happiness too. That way, she can eat delicious meals everyday! 」

His words were cunning, but I couldn't bring myself to hate him when he mix in praises when he speaks... Was my thinking too shallow?

Donda Wu completely refuted my cooking last night, and that left a deep scar in my heart. And what Ludo Wu was saying right now heals the wounds.

「Hmm, that leaves the final method... Getting my stubborn dad to acknowledge you.」

「Didn't I already told you? I have no intention of marrying...」

「I'm not talking about that, I mean making him acknowledge that your cooking is delicious.」

I looked closely at the youth's side profile.

Ludo Wu didn't notice my gaze, placing both hands behind his head as he walked in large strides and swinging his legs out forcefully.

「I think that kiba meat is super delicious, but my dad complains that it is too soft and sweet, right? So if you make a meal that isn't soft or sweet, then dad won't be able to complain about it. If dad acknowledge your cooking skills, he won't protest if our clan's women copied your cooking —— This method is the least likely after all.」

Even if it was hard to pull off, I still wish things could develop in this way.

But I didn't know how to do that.

「... But Donda Wu won't let me tend to the hearth anymore.」

「Hmm? That's not true. If you tell him 『I will make a delicious meal for you, so let me take care of the hearth』, he will definitely agree. If my dad hears that, he won't let the matter rest.」

「... Is that so?」

「Hey hey, don't do it! One wrong move and your fingers might be sliced off! Then I won't be able to eat your cookings ever again... I don't want things to turn out like this.」

I really felt like kissing his smooth cheeks.

However, I would be troubled if this kiss open a brand new world for me or the youth, so I didn't do that.

I see... If he accepts, then I can restore my honor with another dish...!

While my motivation was burning, Ludo Wu sighed beside me and said:

「From the current situation, the simplest way would be to let you marry into the clan. I recommend Leina-nee, you two are the same age, right?」

「No, even if we are the same age, it is strange to marry for such a reason. I wish to be more true to myself in living my life.」

Being true to oneself.

True to my heart.

Ludo Wu answered lazily: 「Right.」

「Ah, you see that board erected over there? Behind it is the water source. I don't want them to give me chores, so I will be leaving first.」

「I got it. Thank you... Ah, it's a bit late to say this, but thanks for the tusk and horn you gave me yesterday, it made me very happy.」

「What do you mean? Those are the blessings I gave you, and you're thanking me? You earned those blessings through proper means, right?」

He stuck his tongue out a little willfully, then turned and left.

They were blood related after all. Just like his cute youngest sister, he was lively and suited for onomatopoeia. Alright time to move on. I looked before me and saw several boards leaning against trees and forming a wall.

I didn't know why they left these boards here, but there were sounds of water splashing and rowdy voices of women on the other side.

I need to get Ai Fa's permission before going on about regaining my honor.

I walked towards the water source as I thought about how to convince her.

The voices sounded really cheerful. That was probably Rimee Wu laughing, she's lively so early in the morning.

「Sorry, but is Ai Fa here?」

I looked in from the shadow of the boards.

The next instant, the subject herself was standing before me.

Ai Fa was right there.

She was rubbing her golden locks with a large piece of cloth, and looking at me in surprise.

Ai Fa's entire body filled my vision without any gaps.

Her skin had a smooth chocolatey color that filled my entire vision.

—— After coming to this different world, the first person I met was Ai Fa.

That's why I thought in the beginning that Ai Fa was a standard denizen of Forest's Edge.

I was absolutely wrong. Ai Fa wasn't a standard denizen, but a very special existence.

This woman actually wield her sabre and hunt kiba beast deep in the forest. Aside from Ai Fa, no other women did this..

I had never met anyone like Ai Fa. She had the eyes of a wild cat, and her movement was as decisive as a man. In Forest's Edge, there wasn't any other girl as brave, strong and full of life and fighting spirit as Ai Fa.

Just her appearance was completely different from the others.

The women of this settlement, especially the young unwed girls were always wearing clothes that show a lot of skin, so I could easily tell that she was different from any of them. No one except Ai Fa had such a shapely body figure.

And of course, since the other women also needed to pick firewood and herbs from the forest, chop wood and carry heavy pots and water flasks, no one was fat out of laziness.

Even so, they were still different from Ai Fa.

In order to sprint in the forest and wield a steel sabre to hunt the ferocious kiba... Ai Fa had to keep training to keep up with these demands. Her body looked as if it had been forged from iron.

In actual fact, Ai Fa's stature was slender, and her arms, legs and torso wasn't too thick. She wasn't as well built as a man.

But her body was trained and filled with strong muscles with live combat experience.

There wasn't any fats on her, just like a leather whip.

She didn't go through any unnatural diet, and maintained her slender figure through hard work as a hunter.

However, she didn't lose the softness of a young woman. Her strong back muscles, small waist and the curves of her legs gave a sense of agility. Her figure made my heart thump.

Ai Fa was beautiful, like a wild leopard.

Her body was graceful like an athlete.

Ai Fa was a woman filled with charm.

No matter if you look at her as an animal, a human or a woman —— her body was beautiful and well proportioned. I had always thought so.

And then...

Ai Fa's wonderful body filled my entire vision.

Even though there were faint white scars all over her brown body, there was still a smooth luster about her and there wasn't any impurities. And now, her body was shown right before me.

Simply put, Ai Fa was naked.

With her legs apart as she stood on top of a boulder, Ai Fa was using a large cloth to dry her wet hair, and stood stiffly still. Ai Fa's front was exposed before my eyes.

There were several nude girls playing behind her. When they noticed me, several of them screamed, but I wasn't aware of all that.

Want to know why?

Like a high speed reel, the mistress of my house quickly blushed, her face a complicated mixture of shame and a demon. With all her might, Ai Fa struck my temple with a right hook.

Part 2

「You really stir up a lot of trouble...」

This was an empty space some distance away from the Wu residence. Someone sighed heavily.

Standing over 180cm tall, a well toned body, slit-like eyes and a smile that made it difficult to read his thoughts —— This was the eldest brother of the Wu clan, Jiza Wu.

The youngest brother Ludo Wu stood beside him and looked into the hills in the distance, as if this didn't concern him at all. Ai Fa and I stood before the two of them.

This scene was like a disciplined master lecturing Ai Fa and me. In reality, the seriousness and urgency was on a completely different level. This secret meeting would decide the future of the Wu clan and the Fa house.

「Seeing the naked body of an unwed woman is a serious taboo, do you understand that?」

「... Yes, I know that very well.」

「According to the rules, to redeem for one's crime, those who infringe on this taboo has to hand over an eye or marry the girl, and watch over her for her entire life. Unfortunately, we don't even know where you hailed from, so we can't let you marry anyone from the Wu clan.」

「... Yes, that is clear to me.」

「Vena, Leina, Lala and Rimee, all four sisters were there. We can't let all these girls marry you.」

「...Yes, I wouldn't dare do that.」

「That might be so, but you don't have four eyes. So what should we do...」

「W-With regards to that, I already told you right in the beginning!」

Even though this was a secret meeting, I couldn't help raising my voice.

「I only saw Ai Fa's naked body!」

Someone kicked my foot.

「Because Ai Fa blocked my entire view, I only saw Ai Fa's naked body!」

I was kicked again.

「Because my attention was attracted to Ai Fa's naked body, I didn't see anything else around me! I only saw Ai Fa's naked body!」

She kicked me in quick succession.

But I would be very sad if my eyes or any body parts were taken from me, so I dispute this desperately.

By the way, after my left temple was hit by that full powered right hook, I could still feel a sharp pain. There wasn't any bleeding, but I was worried about any hair fracture in my skull.

「Hey, don't get distracted by the woman from your own family. Wouldn't that waste my effort for this plan?」

Ludo Wu muttered without any concern about the seriousness of the situation. Jiza Wu turned towards him slowly.

「Ludo Wu, do you know how serious the consequences are?」

He narrowed his eyes to a slit and looked at his younger brother quietly.

Ludo Wu was shocked and after shrinking away for a moment, he raised his brows and said:

「What!? This is making a mountain out of a molehill! This is just an archaic rule made a long time ago. Frankly speaking, no one follows this meaningless regulation in the settlement anymore!」

「You might be right, but with the Tsun clan that leads the entire tribe becoming decadent, we the Wu clan has to be an example for Forest's Edge. Even if the rules are archaic, we must not take them lightly.」

I couldn't see any changes to Jiza Wu's expression. His face was gentle, and no matter how stern his words were, he still had a smile on his face.

But after hearing what Jiza Wu said, the face of Ludo Wu who acted like a barking puppy suddenly turned deathly green.



「I... I get it. It's my bad... I already said I was wrong! Jiza-nii, don't get so mad!」

「I will deal with you later.」

Jiza Wu ignored his pitiful brother and faced us once again.

All of a sudden, I could feel an invisible force pressing on my head.

Where did this man's intimidation aura came from? The pressure was heavy, and I felt as if I was facing a very skilled martial arts practitioner.

「Ai Fa of House Fa, what are your thoughts on your family member who violated this taboo? I will decide after hearing what you have to say.」

Jiza Wu said quietly.

「To block views from the outside, there are door boards set up at the water source. The door board represent the door of a house, and no one is permitted to enter through the door without permission from a family member, which is a rule in Forest's Edge. So Asuta of House Fa broke two taboos—— If it was you, how would you punish him?」

「..... Asuta is a foreigner. As the head of House Fa, I accepted this foreigner into my house, but allowed him to visit another house before teaching him all the rules of Forest's Edge. The fault is mine.」

Ai Fa said emotionlessly, then lowered her head quietly.

「If there is a need to atone for this crime, I'm willing to offer my own eyes. But I won't be able to live on as a hunter in Forest's Edge without both my eyes, so please allow me to give up just one eye...」

「Hey, Ai Fa!」

When I started shouting, Jiza Wu stopped me with a gesture, and held his firm jaw with his hand.

「Ai Fa of House Fa, are you mistaking something? If you lose an eye, you won't be able to make a living by 《hunting kiba》. The forest isn't a playground.」

「... If I fall in the forest because of this, then I will accept that fate.」

「I see.」

Jiza Wu nodded and looked at the anxious me.

「I will ask one more time. Asuta of House Fa, did you see the naked body of the Wu clan's women?」

「I only saw Ai Fa's naked body!」

Even at this juncture, she still kicked me.

「I see.」

Jiza Wu exhaled.

「Asuta, I will believe what you said then... Since you claim to have only seen Ai Fa's naked body, then that will be Fa house's problem, and nothing to do with the Wu clan.」

「... You forgive him?」 Ai Fa asked.

「I'm not forgiving him, I'm believing him.」 Jiza Wu answered.

「Ai Fa, you are a trustworthy person. Since Asuta is from the Fa house where you are the house head, I will believe what he said... Asuta, you mentioned that you didn't take one step beyond the door boards, right?」

「Yes! Because Ai Fa was standing right behind the door board without any clothes on!」

She kicked me again.

I was relieved for being vindicated and didn't mind.

If Ai Fa had to offer one of her eyes, I would rather they take both of mine.

「Since this matter didn't cause any harm to the Wu clan, I won't pursue it further... If blood is spilled over something so trivial, we will be accused by others of using devious schemes to harm the members of another house.」

After Jiza Wu said that, he turned towards Ludo Wu who had turned rather docile.

「Ludo Wu, do you understand now? Your actions not only caused trouble for the Fa house, but will also bring harm to the Wu clan too. You are already an adult who can tell right from wrong, so you have to abide by the rules as a member of the Wu clan.」

「Yes...」

Ludo Wu answered simply, making him look more pitiful

「W-Will he be punished harshly?」

「Hmm? Asuta of house Fa, why are you asking that?」

「Because... Even if he deserved it, I still feel bad about this. If I was smarter about this, I wouldn't have caused such an incident.」

「Hmm... I won't punish him. If I do that, then this matter will reach the ears of the clan head.」

Even though the sun was up, clan head Donda Wu was still sleeping.

「No matter what the rules are, if my father Donda Wu learns this, he will never forgive you. He really dotes on my youngest sister Rimee Wu. Not just your eyes, he will ask for your beating heart.」

「...I see...」

「If things turn out this way, outsiders will think the clan head is a bloodthirsty man and look down on the Wu clan. I hope you can keep this from my other family members aside from the clan head Donda Wu.」

I could only answer: 「I hope you can do the same.」

Not only was their clan reputation at stake, it could cause our house members to lose our life too.

「Well then, let's make peace. The clan head is still resting, so I, Jiza Wu will bid you farewell. May both our houses be safe.」

What he meant was 「if you have no other business then get out」.

I was a little sad that I couldn't bid Rimee Wu and the others farewell, but it couldn't be helped in such a situation. We quietly walked towards the Wu main house with our heads low to collect our blades.

「Oh right, clan head Donda Wu has a message he wants me to relay to you. In order to deliver it accurately, I will repeat exactly what he said.」

With his usual kind smile on his face, Jiza Wu stopped us.

「『Thank you for your nasty tasting meal. Thanks to you two, the Grand Elder is saved. I offer you my blessings for the medicine that corrodes the hunter's soul』... That's the entire message.」

Part 3

「Hey, Ai Fa!」

I called out but she didn't answer.

We have already collected our blades and cape, and were on our way back to the Fa House.

This dirt path in Forest's Edge had been packed tightly by the constant travel of its denizens, and we met a few other people along the way.

This place was about an hour away from the Fa House, and this was the first time I met the people from around here. Every one of them looked at me in surprise. No matter where I was, foreigners in Forest's Edge attire was an intriguing sight for everyone.

I wasn't concerned at all.

For the current me, the most important thing was Ai Fa who was walking in large strides, and had an air of anger and rejection about her.

I had something to discuss with her, but couldn't find the chance to speak.

... Even if I keep quiet, that won't solve the problem.

After making up my mind, I said to the back of the enraged Ai Fa:

「Listen! If you are angry about what happened just now, I admit it's my fault! I'm really sorry. But I don't want this incident to fracture the trust in our relationship. Given all these days we have spent together, can you give me a chance to explain? 」

「.....」

「I didn't mean to do that. Ludo Wu told me the water source was there, I never imagined that the Wu clan water source is an incredibly wide river, and big enough to bathe in. I thought everyone was washing the dinner utensils happily, that's why I looked inside.」

「.....」

「And this is the first time I heard about the marriage part... This is the second time I have seen you naked, how I should take responsibility for that? 」

Even I myself felt embarrassed and troubled after saying that.

That wouldn't do. I tried to say in a frivolous voice:

「If I can marry a beauty like you, I will be so blissed. As you know, I'm not in a position to have this honor! But if this is against the rules, I don't mind marrying into your house...」

My end is nigh.

Ai Fa turned towards me, kicked off the ground and pounced. Her explosive burst was incredible, just like her blow that killed the kiba beast seven days ago.

I was pushed down easily. Ai Fa put her knee onto my stomach, and grabbed at my chest with all her strength, which pressed onto my neck, making it hard to breath.

「H-Hey, Ai Fa...」

「Shut up! You— You jerk! 」

I have completely stepped on her landmine.

There was an intense fire burning in Ai Fa's eyes. She bit her lips tightly as if she was going to draw blood, and her face was completely red.

「You... Do you know how much resolve it took in order for me to live my life by 《hunting kiba》? And you say you want to marry so easily—」

Ai Fa's voice was trembling from her pain, and she kept tightening her grip on my chest.

When I saw the substance slowly dripping from her eyes, my heart was filled with regret.

「I'm sorry! It's my fault, I shouldn't have joked with you! I just want to lighten the awkward mood! I don't mean any harm!」

This was 200% my fault. There was no question about it, it was obvious.

Not because of a proper argument or friction from clash of emotions. I made a girl's eyes filled with tears because of my frivolous tone. I have lived for seventeen years, and felt a very strong sense of guilt over this action.

「I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! The guilt from making a strong girl like you cry is suffocating me! Please don't cry!」

「Stop kidding around! Who's crying!?!」

Ai Fa shouted when a drop of warm substance fell onto my cheeks.

The emotional fire in Ai Fa's eyes was like the flames of hell, I even thought that her tears would evaporate because of that. Unfortunately, such a miracle didn't happen, and my heart breaks with each drop of her tears.

I thought I was going to die.

If Ai Fa broke down and wail like Rimee Wu the day before yesterday, I would definitely die from pain and regret over my own foolishness.

But the honorable female hunter Ai Fa didn't wail loudly. She pushed me away, then after walking some distance away, she turned and wiped away her tears.

I slowly pushed my upper body up, and called out to Ai Fa who was sat down with her back facing me.

「Eh, Ai Fa...?」

「I'm not crying.」

「Yes, you're not crying! I saw it wrong! I heard that when someone is strangled tightly, his vision will become blurry due to the lack of oxygen!」

Ai Fa stood up quietly, rubbed her face with her arm and continued striding forth.

After a heavy sigh, I chased after Ai Fa.

Fortunately, there wasn't any other pedestrian during this period of time.

That's right, she isn't a woman who only has a cold side.

Ai Fa just stared ahead and alternate her footing.

There wasn't any more tears in her eyes, but her cheeks were still blushed and her expression was more bitter than usual.

I didn't plan to say anything unnecessary to her before she revert back to her usual fearless expression. After making this decision, I cast my gaze to the front.

As if she was waiting for me to avert my gaze, Ai Fa whose mouth was shut unhappily opened:

「... Why have you been showing a face as if you are splitting hairs since just now?」

「Ehh? Because I'm troubled, and wondering how I can make up with you.」

「I'm not asking that. Are you troubled by something else? If not, you wouldn't be filled with so much regret.」

Even though she was really mad, she still noticed that, which surprised me.

「Yes, I actually have something I need to discuss with you. But it is a little complicated, so I will tell you when you regain your composure.」

「Stop kidding me! I'm always calm and composed!」

Her tone felt even more childish.

Would this really be fine? I was worried, but started talking in order to respect her wishes:

「Erm, then I will begin. It will sound very sudden, so don't be mad. If you stop me, I will just give up the idea.」

「... It had been just a few short hours, but I feel that I have been provoked for years. Are you going to continue with your nonsense?」

「If you think there isn't any need, don't hesitate to stop me... I want to let Donda Wu taste my cooking again.」

Ai Fa narrowed her eyes slightly, and cast an icy gaze at me.

I tried to describe my feelings sincerely.

「If Donda Wu don't acknowledge my cooking, the Wu clan won't learn how to bloodlet. Then from tomorrow onwards, Grandma Jiba will have to eat meat with a strong stench again, right? Leaving that aside, I feel vexed that someone criticized my food to be poison and foul tasting.」

Ai Fa didn't answer.

Her eyes were half closed as she glared at me.

「Things have finally ended nicely, and I also know it's better to not be too involved with that clan. Aside from Grandma Jiba and Rimee Wu, it's better to not get too close to the other members of the Wu clan... But, it's still very vexing.」

「...So that's it.」

「Hmm?」

「After hearing someone put you down that hard, it will be strange to not be troubled. It's not something worth nagging about.」

「That's right. But we can't get involved with the Wu clan right? That's why I'm troubled.」

「...Don't be.」 Ai Fa said.

She then continued: 「Just do what your heart tells you to.」

「Huh? You mean you won't mind if I give that eccentric old man a challenge letter?」

「If you wish to, I won't stop you.」

「Why are you acting like it doesn't concern you!? You will be troubled if you fail, right?」

「If you don't want to trouble me, then sever your relationship with me.」 —— Will she say that again? If she did, I will protest even if she shouts or cries.

But she didn't bring that up at all.

「Donda Wu doesn't intend to let me marry into the Wu clan anymore. Going by that man's nature, he won't permit a girl to hunt Kiba. All that I feel from that man is hostility and mockery.」

「Erm, since he is hostile towards you, then we shouldn't get involved with him right?」

「Why? Since he is the enemy, we just need to make him submit, right?」

Ai Fa said without hesitation.

When she saw how troubled I looked, Ai Fa snorted.

「I'm not asking you to defeat Donda Wu with a sabre. I'm asking you to subdue his heart with your delicious cooking—— Isn't that true?」

「Instead of subdue, that's getting him to acknowledge me, right? Never mind, I'm full of drive right now.」

「In that case, do as you wish,,, I also hope that Grandma Jiba can continue to taste delicious meals in the future too.」

Ai Fa's voice got softer towards the end, and I couldn't hear her unless my ears were right beside her.

「However, before you explain the reason why you are doing this, I have to ask you one thing.」

The gleam in Ai Fa's eyes became more dangerous.

「Can you win?」

「My chances huh...」

After considering it for two seconds, I answered 「There is a chance.」

「There is?」

「Yes. I still need to research it for a bit more, but there is still plenty of meat left at home for me to do so.」

「Then, can you win?」

「Hmm? Ara, sometimes, it's a matter of luck...」

「You have to win. You are not permitted to lose.」 Ai Fa turned her face away.

「When I heard him disparage your cooking with such terrible words, I almost couldn't stand it anymore. If Donda Wu shows such an arrogant attitude again... I will definitely blow my top, I don't know what I will do.」

When she saw me stare with my eyes wide open, Ai Fa blushed again.

「Do you know how humiliated I felt when I listened to what that man said last night? I felt like splashing his face with the boiling soup in the iron pot.」

Didn't you show a cold expression the entire time yesterday?

I thought about it again. Ai Fa's mood swings wildly, but she would always seem expressionless when facing different people, and even look a bit cold.

She actually had such burning passion under her pure and cold exterior.

「But, we're dining in the house of someone else—— and the Wu clan at that. If I acted so insolently, the Fa bloodline will have ended right then. And so, if you want to challenge this task, be prepared to shoulder the reputation of the Fa house.」

「I got it.」 I nodded firmly.

I felt a warm itch squirming in my heart.

「Thank you, Ai Fa. I didn't know you were so upset.」

「Hmmp! Because you are still a member of the Fa house for now! As the house head, it's only natural for me to be mad when others disparage my house member unreasonably!」

After Ai Fa said her piece angrily, she pouted like a child.

「... And no matter what nonsense other people say, that dish is definitely delicious.」

Why did she say that?

Was Ai Fa trying to make me cry to get back at me for earlier?

I didn't cry, and was all smiles instead.

「Ai Fa, you always give me a push at the last crucial moment. I could feel fighting spirit overflowing from my heart.」

「...Hmmp.」

「Well, it's great that boring incident didn't harm the relationship between us. I will be in your care from now on too, Ai Fa!」

「...You violated two taboos and still have the cheeks to say they are boring.」

The way she scowled her nose make her look like an angry wild cat. Ai Fa was already back to her usual self.

I became even more happy at the sight of her scary face.

「That's right, there's no way it can be boring since I saw your naked body, Ai Fa! That's my sincere thoughts!」

I was getting too conceited and Ai Fa whacked me in the back of the head with her full force.

Part 4

In the following days, I spent my time researching the ways to grill kiba meat—— When I put it this way, it might sound like I just kept grilling meat all day without rest, which was not the case of course.

In Forest's Edge, if you don't work, you don't eat. So I have to finish my daily chores properly. And I also need to gather the materials in order to conduct research and perform a lot of physical labor.

For example securing firewood.

Without firewood, I wouldn't be able to grill meat.

Filled with drive, I wanted to use this opportunity to find a way to adjust the heat in a stove.

It would take years to make it work, but I couldn't take it so easily.

First of all, there was only one stove in the Fa house, and I have to cook under such a restricted setting. If I boil the 『kiba meat soup』 with strong fire, I would need to reduce the number of firewood I add later, and let it boil slowly. This was the limit of my heat control.

However, the Wu clan has many stoves. By shifting the pot around during cooking, I would be able to use strong and weak fire respectively. That was why I didn't make any mini hamburger steak during dinner in the Wu clan, but normal sized one—— 「maintaining a weak flame」 was difficult for cooking.

This was different from using a flat frying pan on top of a gas stove. The shape of every piece of wood differs, and the amount could only be a rough gauge by eye. The iron pot used in Forest's Edge was thicker than flat frying pans too, and the heat transfer was slow. But once it heats up, the intensity was very strong. This was a troublesome feature too.

My focus yesterday was to not let the hamburger steak get burned. There wasn't any failure, but was the fire too weak, resulting in the juices leaking out? I couldn't wipe away my uneasiness. I hope I didn't need to be so worried the next time I see Donda Wu.

Hence, the first obstacle for me was 「adjusting a weak flame.」

How much firewood should I add? How big a fire should I raise? I need to watch how much firewood I use, how intense the fire and smoke was and grasp the condition of the grilled meat at the same time. This was a match of patience, and beginning of a journey with no end in sight.

Anyway, I kept burning firewood and grilling meat.

The entire house was filled with smoke and it was hard to breathe.

I really envy the Wu clan's environment during times like this, allowing them to build an outdoor stove. But it was useless to envy the rich—— So I could only keep staring at my hand like Takuboku Ishikawa². But someone wasn't pleased about this.

That person was my only other housemate, the mistress of this house, Ai Fa.

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Takuboku_Ishikawa

That afternoon after returning home from the Wu clan, Ai Fa finished her hunter's work and came home. When she saw the terrible state of the house that had been smoked by firewood and meat, she roared: 「What the hell are you doing!?!」

In order to defeat that kiba old man, I have to research. I protested in a soft voice, and tried to use my natural cuteness to curry the female house head. But she didn't care and lectured:

「Are you stupid? Just make a stove outside.」

Ai Fa said as she flicked her blonde hair back.

I felt enlightened.

Forest's Edge didn't have carpenters, architects or interior designers. The denizens made the houses and furnitures by hand.

「We will starve to death without stoves, so I more or less know how to build one.」

Ai Fa's father passed away two years ago, and she was fifteen at that time. She then broke off ties with everyone else and lived by herself. Having come from a different world, I never imagined she was so knowledgeable.

And I didn't think every fifteen year old youth in Forest's Edge would know how to erect a stove.

Ai Fa's father seemed to have foreseen that he would die young, and hastily imparted all his knowledge to his daughter—— Such a thought even occurred to me.

But there wasn't anyway to confirm this now, and I have no intention of doing so.

I just keep praising Ai Fa: 「you are amazing」, and felt blissful for her existence.

And so, one day after we returned from the Wu clan, Ai Fa and I started working hard on erecting a stove.

I knew it would be tough, but this was really back breaking work. We pulled our tow board to a quarry, and bring back rocks that was the right size. We kept bringing back rocks and piled them on the ground. It was a battle of stamina and determination.

We erected a stove right behind the Fa house.

We needed to keep adding firewood into the stove while the sun was still high in the sky. To keep it away from the gaze of outsiders, it would be prudent to build it in a place not visible from the main road. More importantly, there was a tall tree behind the Fa house, which could protect the

stove for us even if it rains suddenly. I planned to erect a roof in the future with this tree as its base.

We kept ferrying rocks.

And piled it higher and higher.

We piled it in an oval shape, like a small hill. It had holes in the front and on top, and the center was completely empty. Obviously, it was impossible to erect a stove just by piling rocks. Ai Fa brought back 「sticky clay」 from the forest and used it to plaster every rock.

The grey stone she brought back could only be found in a special quarry. After smashing the rock into pieces and dissolving it in water, it would be ready for use. As it would make our hands sticky, we had to struggle with it as we pushed it into the gaps between the rocks. When the stove's outline had somewhat been formed, we tried burning some firewood.

If it wasn't airtight or if some parts crumbled when the fire was burning, we would reinforce it with more clay.

After repeating this for five to six times, we finally stopped the smoke from leaking out from the crevices. We then mixed in sand into the clay, and after making it gooey, we applied it evenly to the inside and outside of the stove.

We then baked the entire stove, and the erection would be complete when the clay hardens.

「Uwah!! I'm covered in sweat! This took us half a day.」

The sun was at the western edge of the sky, and white smoke of family cooking their meals were rising all around us.

「.....Asuta, I'm hungry.」

Ai Fa who was sitting down couldn't hide her fatigue.

「That's true. We built a stove today, so let's cook with it. Do you want meat soup or hamburg steak?」

「Hamburg steak.」

With my body still collapsed onto the ground, I turned towards Ai Fa.

Ai Fa showed a scary face and asked: 「What?」

「Nothing, I just thought your answer is really quick. But we ate hamburg steak last night too, and this will be the fourth night in a row eating the same thing. Is that fine?」

「..... It's fine.」

You don't need to answer after such a long pause.

I already took some time off during the stove construction to grill poitan, so she could pick any dish she wanted. Mincing the meat would be slightly more of a hassle, but Ai Fa spent half a day to erect this stove for me, so cooking that dish for her as thanks for nothing given my gratitude towards her.

While I was groaning, Ai Fa called out to me again.

「Asuta.」

「What's the matter Ai Fa?」

「The hamburg steak we ate in the Wu house two days ago was bigger.」

「Oh, in my hometown, that's the normal size.」

「... Why is the hamburg steak you make in the Fa house so small?」

「Oh, didn't I tell you? In order to make it that big, I would need to grill it twice with both a strong fire and a weak fire. If I only use a strong fire, the surface would be burnt. Just using a weak fire would make it hard to cook, and the juices would leak out. So I can only make it into the small and cute size.」

「So that's why.」

「Yes, that's the reason.」

「Asuta.」

「What is it, Ai Fa?」

「... The Fa house has two stoves now.」



「Yes, I'm really happy about that. But one is inside the house, and the other is outside, so it will be hard to shift the iron pot. It will be hard to use these two stoves separately when cooking one dish.」

That also meant I wouldn't be able to use my skills to maintain a slow fire in cooking. This would be a problem. As I was thinking about that, Ai Fa's eyes were burning with the setting sun as a backdrop.

And so, we erected a second outdoor stove the very next day.

I collapsed onto the ground in front of the two stoves standing side by side like twin brothers.

「Uwah! I'm completely beat! Building stoves for two days in a row is too tiring! My arms are swollen! Can I even cook like this?」

After I laid down on the ground and whine, Ai Fa whose eyes were moving around suddenly stared right at me.

「It's fine, I will still cook. I will serve up a large 『hamburg steak』 for you... so don't cry.」

「Who's crying!?!」

「That's great then... And I can finally start researching grilled cooking tomorrow. Ai Fa, I'm very grateful.」

「Hmph.」

「By the way, from tomorrow onwards, I want you to try the grilled food I will be making to defeat Donda Wu. This will be the last hamburg steak for quite a while.」

「Last meal...」

「If you want to eat that, I will cook it for you in the future... Hey, don't cry, alright?」

「Who's crying!?!」

「Right. You really like hamburg steaks. If you eat hamburg steak everyday, your jaw strength will really degrade just like Jiza Wu says...」

At this moment, I felt something was wrong.

Jaw strength, degrade...?

If it degrades...

What would happen?

「I see.」

I pressed the middle of my brows and fell into deep thought.

「That's... true...」

「What's the matter, Asuta?」

Ai Fa leaned in with a serious face.

Her golden brown hair was sticking to her sweaty face a little, and how should I put this—— she looked a little sexy.

「I-It's nothing! I'm just confirming the direction my cooking should take. I will work hard to make something chewy and as tasty as hamburg steak, so look forward to it.」

As the tentacles of my thoughts spread in all directions, I asked Ai Fa something that had been troubling me:

「Speaking of which, we have spent two days building the stoves, you have been a great help, Ai Fa. But is your hunting going well? It has been about ten days since we have hunted down a kiba, right?」

「It's fine, I got an unexpected reward in the Wu clan.」

Ai Fa clasped the necklace hanging before her chest.

Like me, Ai Fa obtained eight horns.

Ai Fa was already wearing a large number of tusks and horns, so she kept the additional ones in the pocket of her cape.

「Eight horns is equal to two kiba beast, or twenty meals of aria and poitan... this is an incredible amount for tending the hearth just once.」

「This is an adequate reward for you.」

Ai Fa stared at the fire burning in the stove and said softly:

「If it is the lull season for kiba, I won't be able to hunt any kiba no matter how long I walked in the forest. The forest might be vast, but the area we can venture into are limited. The furthest we can wander is restricted as we have to return home within the same day.」

「Yes, that make sense.」

「But if we hunt down all the kiba around the settlement, and the fruits and small animals which the kiba likes start to flourish, the kiba hiding deeper in the forest will move in to forage for food. There will then be a never ending supply of kiba to hunt.」

「I see, it has become a fixed cycle.」

However, Ai Fa's burden doubled after I appeared, so I don't think this matter was this simple.

Just hunting one kiba every ten days was enough to sustain one person, but hunting one every five days would be needed for two people. *May the bountiful season come before Ai Fa's saving decreases*—— I prayed in my heart.

The next day, Ai Fa came home with huge horns and tusks in tow.

「A kiba fell into the trap you were caught in last time.」 she said.

The day after, she came home with large horns and tusks again.

「It's a big one today, my knife almost broke.」

She needed to risk her life to hunt kiba.

I felt ashamed for praying for her to have a bountiful season.

Another day passed—— Ai Fa actually carried a 50kg young kiba home.

「I tried bloodletting like you said. It bled and spasmed for quite a while, it should be okay.」

I was burning firewood in the stove outside at that time. Ai Fa collapsed onto her butt.

She was covered in sweat and dirt, and seemed to be in pain as she panted.

Of course she would be so tired. Even a small kiba weighed at least 50 kg, which should be around Ai Fa's weight.

「A-Are you okay? You did something so reckless...」

「I'm fine... water.」

I hurried into the house and scooped up a full ladle of water.

When Ai Fa tried to take the ladle, I noticed that her arms were shaking. So I moved the ladle right to her lips, and tilt it slightly.

After Ai Fa finished it in one gulp, she exhaled and laid sprawled onto the ground.

Her shapely breasts rise and fell violently. I was a little troubled, and wondered where I should look.

I shifted my gaze to the kiba beast laying side by side with Ai Fa.

The head and throat of the carcass were stained with blood, and its small eyes seemed to be shut tightly in sadness. It wasn't very tall, but it was chubby and round, and probably full of fats. As its horns were bigger than its tusks, I assumed that it was a young male kiba.

「... We still have half the meat left, you don't need to force yourself.」

After I said that, Ai Fa continued to lay sprawled out as she looked at me unhappily:

「What are you talking about. The meat will start rotting in another five days.」

「Right. In that case, you can just bloodleet it in the forest and just bring the legs back——」

「Aren't you the one who was always yammering about 『discarding the torso is a waste』, right?」

Ai Fa said with her eyes closed and breathing still a little ragged.

「Why are you finding fault with me? Did I do something unnecessary?」

「Not at all...! I'm very grateful, thank you Ai Fa.」

Ai Fa opened her eyes and glanced at me:

「... If you want to thank me, then show it through action.」

「H-Huh? What should I do?」

Ai Fa got up slowly, and with her mouth slightly pouting, she looked up at me.

「... I want to have hamburg steak tonight.」

I only asked her to eat grilled meat for two days, and she was already showing withdrawal symptoms.

I nodded firmly:

「Got it! I will start preparing it after butchering it! Just wait for me and look forward to it!」

Ai Fa nodded. She looked a little weird.

Her expression was rather unnatural, as if she was suppressing her smile.

When I saw her like this, I could feel my motivation burning. I looked up to the sky and sighed.

Part 5

Ten hectic days passed in a flash

Which means, it had been two weeks since I got transported to this different world.

I spent the first five days with Ai Fa alone, and met Rimee Wu on the 5th night. We visited the Wu clan on the sixth day, and went home the very next day. Another ten days had past—— to be more precise, it had been sixteen days.

I felt I had been in this world since a long time ago. On the other hand, I was surprised that it had been so many days.

No matter what, this had been a busy sixteen days.

Especially this week, I spent every day burning wood and grilling meat. I finally figured something out, and planned to visit the Wu clan tomorrow morning to issue my challenge letter.

No matter how hard I try, there was no end to the study of flame intensity. I needed to find the right moment to stop, and that time was now.

Ai Fa's dinner tonight was my final prototype. She tasted it, and guaranteed that: 「It's as tasty as a hamburg steak」.

A meal befitting the denizens Forest's Edge—— a dish that the denizens of Forest's Edge could enjoy happily. That was the key of the dish I came up with. When I see Ai Fa's contented expression I sincerely thought: 「This dish will definitely be fine.」

「To be honest, if I didn't meet you, I would have died somewhere without achieving anything.」

After dinner, I tidied up the utensils and laid on the rug contentedly, then said this out of nowhere.

Ji ji ji... The soft sound of the candle burning could be heard. Ai Fa showed an unhappy face:

「If it's you, no matter how dire the situation you end up in, or who brings you home, you will definitely be able to overcome it... Is that what you want me to say?」

「I don't think so highly of myself, and I don't plan on underestimating this world either. You are the first person I met in this unfamiliar land. How lucky is that? After spending two days here, I was very aware of this fact.」

「... Why do you always start talking about serious things at night, or bring up melancholic topics? It's troubling to be influenced by you one sidedly.」

Ai Fa flicked up her blonde hair under the candle light.

When it was time for bed, Ai Fa would always let her hair down.

I watched her beautiful long hair gleaming in the candlelight and smiled.

「Is that so? I have been in this world for some time, but I couldn't shake off my habits of my life in the other world. To me, talking quietly with someone in the dark isn't something that happens naturally, so I will definitely feel melancholic.」

Speaking of which, I feel as if I was participating in a graduation trip everyday.

I couldn't see her face clearly under the orange candle glow, but we still chat slowly until we drift off to sleep. Since I think this situation was unique, that means I haven't gotten used to this world yet.

「If you think I'm gloomy and it makes you unhappy, I apologize. But when I talk to you with this feeling in my heart, how do I put it—— it feels comfortable.」

「... Didn't I tell you? This serious tone don't suit you at all, it feels disgusting.」

Ai Fa leaned against the wall lazily, and kicked at me who was lying even more lazily on the rug. In order to conserve the candle, we would light only one candle after dinner. And to keep each other in sight, we would usually stay close to each other.

With Ai Fa relaxing beside me, this feels really comfortable.

I felt uneasy about spending the night with a girl, but it was calming now. After living together for a long time, a sense of family was budding between us. Ai Fa's existence was as natural as the air itself—— but that wasn't the reason.

It did plays a part, but I don't completely think of Ai Fa as family. If she was my family, I wouldn't be so shaken when I see her beautiful face, smooth brown skin, her occasional sad expression and childish actions.

I was from another world—— If not for this negative element, I would fall in love with Ai Fa right away.

No, I have probably fallen for her.

In the seventeen years of my life, aside from my family and childhood friend, no one has occupied my heart like she did. We have only been together for a few days, and she managed to make me fall head over heels for her.

However, I still didn't want to break the relationship between us.

I couldn't predict what tomorrow might bring—— I might be pulled back to my original world one day, and be engulfed in flames. With such worries and fear in mind, I didn't intend to take any irresponsible actions. And so, even if Ai Fa's bewitching body would cause a stir in my heart, I could still spend the night peacefully.

Why did these feelings of mine become so clear? The sexy Vena Wu assaulting me probably played a part.

How did the members of the Wu clan spend this night?

Aside from Rimee Wu, I have only spent one night together with the other Wu members.

I think they weren't bad people.

And of course, the second brother Darum Wu wasn't someone I could open my heart to, and I have reservations towards the eldest son Jiza Wu and the eldest daughter Vena Wu.

But except for them—— I have not spoken to many others, and they didn't leave too bad of an impression on me.

The wife of the clan head Mia Lei Wu was a bold and generous mother.

The spouse of Jiza Wu, Sati Lei Wu was a quiet and gentle woman.

Grandmother of the seven siblings, Ditto Min who tended to the stove together with me, was a warm and dignified grandmother.

Second sister Leina Wu was a cute and honest girl.

The youngest brother Ludo Wu gave me a lot of trouble, but I still find it hard to hate him.

I had almost no contact with the third sister Lala Wu and never seen her smile at all. But my impression of her wasn't bad.

I think Rimee Wu is a good kid. Just seeing her smile was enough to cheer me up, that's how lovable she was. And she was an important person for Ai Fa. *I really hope her character will stay the same when she grows up*—— Rimee Wu makes others feel this way.

And next, Grandma Jiba—— their most important Grand Elder.

This grandmother was incredible, like a character straight out of a tale. Her turbulent life was hard to imagine, and coming into contact with her in such a great way made me proud and happy.

And the leader of the Wu family was the clan head Donda Wu.

Personally, this man shattered my pride as a chef.

I want to fill the Wu family's dining table with happiness to redeem for the mistake because of my shallow thoughts. Similarly, the urge to surprise that eccentric man was equally strong—— I don't deny that.

In that case, I feel that I shouldn't handle this matter with a heart of anger and hate.

Even if that burly man was not as violent and arrogant as his appearance suggests, I wouldn't want to become close friends with him. But he was still Rimee Wu's father, and Jiba Wu's grandson.

And a chef shouldn't bear any hostility in the first place.

I wanted to have this battle for the sake of my pride and dignity as a chef. But I wasn't aiming to subdue that man, but to be acknowledged by him.

Also—— I have never heard of a chef barging into someone else's house and forcing the other party to eat his cooking. I'm still a half baked chef that couldn't suppress the regret in my heart.

And so, I hope to at least bring a harmonious atmosphere to his family, not create a rift in their relationship.

What kind of ending was awaiting us?

That would depend on our meeting tomorrow.

「...Hmm?」

I heard the sound of a soft object plopping down. I raised my head and saw Ai Fa who was leaning against the wall had laid down.

「Oh, you are sleeping? If you want to sleep, I will turn off the light.」

「No... I'm still up.」

There wasn't any need to be stubborn over such a trivial matter. I smiled wryly, pushed my body that was exhausted from the day's work, and closed the candle stand by the window.

Darkness engulfed my vision immediately —— my eyes adjusted to the moonlight in no time.

Ai Fa remained in the same position, leaning by the wall.

Her long golden locks spread on the ground softly under the pale moonlight.

Careful not to step on her hair, I laid down some distance away.

「... If it's you, no matter how dire the situation you end up in, or who brings you home, you will definitely be able to overcome it...」

I could hear a hardly audible voice say that.

I replied in the same volume 「that's not true」, then closed my eyes.

We spent some of our time quietly like this, and some of times noisily as we work towards the moment we settle our differences with Donda Wu.

Chapter 3 - Pact and Reunion

Part 1

「... I thought I would never see you two again.」

This was the Wu main house.

Donda Wu bit hard on black jerky and sat cross legged with one knee up. Behind him was a large, prominent and elegant kiba skull and pelt.

It had been eleven days since we left the Wu house.

Now was right around noon.

Only the eldest son Jiza Wu stood beside the clan head.

Aside from the clan head's wife Mia Lei Wu who welcomed us in the beginning, we didn't meet any other women. They were probably making rugs, extracting fats or busy with other work.

We handed over our blades and sat at the bottom seats. Donda Wu faced Ai Fa and me and continued:

「You two are actually here at a time like this. Head of the Fa house Ai Fa, can you afford to neglect your important work as a hunter?」

「It's fine. I have hunted four kiba in half a month. There's just the two of us in our house, so we can manage.」

By the way, one month was thirty days in this world.

There were twelve months in one year, and about 360 days. But there was a thirteenth month every three years, and I still didn't really get how the calendar works over here.

Anyways, after hearing Ai Fa's answer, Donda Wu just glared at her, exhaled and said:

「So? You don't have any business with me, right? If you want to visit the Grand Elder, go on ahead.」

「Please let us visit her later. Before that, Fa house member Asuta would like to apologize to the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu.」

「... Apologize?」 Donda Wu said with his lips twisted grumpily.

I went into a seiza position, and bowed deeply:

「Some days ago, the meals I served displeased the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu. I offer my sincere apologies to the Wu clan. This is because my skills in tending to the hearth is still immature, so I would like to apologize to everyone for that.」

「Hmmp, what nonsense are you saying? I don't understand at all, hearth caretaker of the Fa house.」

The malicious mocking came from the top of my head.

「You saved the soul of Grand Elder Jiba Wu, so I won't pursue your crime of letting me eat food that would corrode the soul of a hunter. I already let the matter rest and you are still here to apologize, I don't know how to answer you.」

「Yes, that's why Asuta of Fa house have a request for the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu.」

I raised my head and straightened my back, then stared right at Donda Wu's burly face:

「Can you let me tend to the Wu clan's hearth one more time? 」

「... What did you say? 」

「The reason I tended to the hearth here last time was for the sake of letting Grand Elder Jiba Wu's heart find peace. I'm happy to have achieved that goal, but my cookings made clan head Donda Wu and his family unhappy instead. I'm glad that you have forgiven my transgression, but I don't mean to upset everyone.」

A fierce glaring gleam appeared in Donda Wu's eyes.

He unleashed an enormous amount of pressure, and I felt as if I was facing a beast.

Even so, I looked back at him with tenacious eyes and said:

「Please allow me to tend to the Wu clan's hearth again. This time, I will bring peace and satisfaction to all the members of your house.」

「Every member of my house, huh...After eating that rotten kiba meat, eight out of twelve members have already given you their blessings, and you are still not satisfied? 」

Donda Wu's voice surprised me.

Before I understand why I felt that way, a ferocious smile appeared on his face.

「Brat, food has no distinction of being delicious or not. Just eating kiba meat, and ingredients we used the kiba tusks and horns to exchange for is enough to bring peace and satisfaction to my soul. These two things were only lacking when you serve me that unpalatable dinner that night.」

「Yes. In that case... I promise you that I will make you feel more peace and satisfaction.」

「... Promise? 」 Donda Wu's lips twisted once again.

「Brat, you want to make a promise with the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu? 」

「Yes.」

「If you don't fulfill this promise, do you know what will happen to you, brat? 」

「... Do what you wish.」

At this moment, the eldest son Jiza Wu interjected:

「Father, head of the Wu clan Donda Wu. Even though he said that, the Fa house isn't wealthy and can't compensate us with money. If they fail to keep their promise, they can only repay with their body. If blood is spilled over such a reckless matter, the reputation of the Wu clan will plummet. 」

「Hmmp. That brat isn't a denizen of Forest's Edge, but a pale skinned outsider, right? 」

「But he is a member of the Fa house now. Even if he is a foreigner, he is still a denizen of Forest's Edge.」

He was worried about our safety—— that wasn't the case.

Jiza Wu was very serious about the rules of Forest's Edge, and didn't want others to tend to his family's hearth, or for the clan head to perform any violent act.

「Hold on, I'm not that violent that I would make someone bleed because of the quality of food. On the precondition that they don't serve me poison that will corrode my hunter's soul 」

A smile of a hunter who found his prey appeared on Donda Wu's boulder-like face.

「But it is boring to set a promise without anything at stakes... Hey brat, do you have the resolve to serve the food you are so proud of to the people from another house? 」

「What? 」

I didn't get what he meant, so I tilted my head confusedly. The burly man before me who was like the reincarnation of a kiba showed a gleeful face:

「In ten days, the kin family of the Wu clan, the Lutim house will be holding a wedding. Three nights from now, the head of the Lutim house will visit here to arrange the wedding preparation. The Wu clan will have an extravagant feast to pre-celebrate the wedding—— I'm asking if you have the resolve to tend to the hearth on that day.」

「Clan head, that's too...」

「Shut up Jiza.」

The Wu clan successor had an imposing aura about him, but even he couldn't go against the clan head.

Jiza Wu narrowed his eyes and sighed. I glanced his way, and then asked:

「How many attendees would there be?」

「Not many, just three from their side. The head of the Lutim house, his eldest son and the bride.」

「Eldest son of their main house...」 Ai Fa muttered softly.

「That's right, the eldest son of their main house.」

Donda Wu laughed and said:

「He's the successor of the Lutim main house. He's getting married, and this is the happiest affair for the Lutim house... By the way, of all the kin house of the Wu clan, The Lutim is the largest. Not only do they have many men, they have the closest relations with the Wu clan. If you enraged them, then the Wu clan will have no choice but to break off ties with the Fa house.」

「Break off ties?」

I turned towards Ai Fa.

Ai Fa listened quietly to Donda Wu's words.

「The Wu clan will break off all interaction with the Fa house. Even if the Fa house come to the Wu clan for aid, the Wu clan won't lend a hand... This don't just apply to the Wu main house. Be it the Wu branch house or the six houses that are tied by blood to the Wu clan, over a hundred of our kin will break all relations with the Fa house.」

「Why...?」

I asked

Ai Fa didn't even bat an eye.

「Ai Fa of house Fa, you turned down the wedding proposal of the Wu clan before. But are you misunderstanding something? Did you think you can live so liberally in Forest's Edge because of your smarts and wits?」

Donda Wu leaned his arm on the knee he had propped up, and leaned forth:

「Those guys from Tsun clan only refrained from laying their hands on you because they think you have ties to the Wu clan. In the end, you didn't marry into the Wu clan, but they still think you have relations with the Wu clan... Since it's the delusion of those morons, you don't need to worry about it. I'm not trying to sell you any favor, but since it will bother the Tsun clan people, I'm not so kind that I would clear their doubts. That's why I didn't give this matter much thought.」

「... So?」

Ai Fa tilted her head slightly.

The light within her blue eyes grew a little stronger.

「So?... So, if the Wu clan declares that we will break all ties with you, that means there will be nothing stopping those bunch of people from the Tsun clan from doing what they did two years ago. For them, bullying a little girl without any backing is easier than killing a baby kiba.」

「Does Forest's Edge permit such lawlessness?」

「Without power, what's the use of talking about law? In Forest's Edge, abducting or bullying girls are taboo. But if the one breaking these taboos are the chief Tsun clan, then who can hold them accountable and punish them? Other than the Wu clan, which other house can match them in martial prowess?」

I maintained my kneeling position and clenched my fists.

My gaze passed through this burly man, and an emotion bordering killing intent towards the subject of his speech welled up within me.

「Furthermore, you don't have any other family or kin, the only other member of your house is that outsider kneeling there. Even if someone abducts you, the residents nearby won't even notice. That's why that moron broke the taboo two years ago and barged into your home, right? After what happened that night, he will be back with a few other men next time.」

「... Who cares how many people he brings? I will defeat them all.」

Fire was finally spewing out of Ai Fa's eyes.

She glared at the huge man who was like a beast, her eyes were as intense as the other party.

「Is this the conditions given by the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu? If my family Asuta can't satisfy the members of the Wu and Lutim family, the Wu clan will declare that they will break off ties with the Fa house... I accept. As the head of the Fa house, I accept this condition.」

「Hey, Ai Fa!」

I yelled, and Ai Fa looked at me with angry fire in her blue eyes.

「What? Are you going to tell me that you're not confident? I already told you to have the resolve to shoulder the reputation of the Fa house and accept the challenge.」

Ai Fa was furious.

After spending so much time with her, this might be the first time —— that she showed such rage.

She probably wasn't this mad because of Donda Wu's unreasonable request.

But because she had not depended on the sympathy of the Wu clan in all her time living in Forest's Edge—— she felt that her dignity had been trampled by him.

Ai Fa...

To be honest, I didn't want to make this agreement with him.

Leaving the situation of the Tsun clan aside, we had finally started interacting with Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba again. If we broke off all ties with the Wu clan, we would have to break all relations with the two of them again.

If Ai Fa could be saved by throwing away my pride, I wouldn't hesitate in throwing all of it away. Using Ai Fa's happiness and safety as chips in a match was too foolish.

However...

Even if I run away from this challenge, Ai Fa wouldn't be saved either.

I wouldn't be able to save her noble and tenacious spirit.

If I back down here, Ai Fa would think I wanted to trample on her honor and pride instead and become raging mad.

「Asuta...」 she called out to me softly.

She stared at me with her blue burning eyes.

Her brows were furrowed in a deep frown, and after she called out my name, her lips were tightly shut—— and her shoulders started trembling a little.

Even you don't believe me...?

I won't give in to this, don't you trust me...?

I could feel her fiery eyes telling me this agitatedly.

「... I understand.」

I muttered softly, then turned to Donda Wu and said:

「I accept these conditions.」

Donda Wu became expressionless.

Fingers as large as a baseball mitt brushed through his unkempt hair.

「You accept? Do you know what you are saying?」

「I accept these terms.」

I repeated myself firmly.

Donda Wu's eyes were filled with rage, and he said:

「Very well, I will make this pact with you, hearth tender. If the thing you cook can't satisfy me, then give the thing you are wearing so proudly on your neck back to the Wu clan... A fool who breaks his promise is not worthy of the Wu clan's blessings.」

「I understand.」

I remained calm on the surface and nodded in reply.

Was this really fine? I glanced to the side, and Ai Fa's head was slightly lowered, her eyelids shielding her burning gaze.

If I wasn't mistaken——

Her lips seemed to be raised in a satisfied smile.

Part 2

「Oh, have you finished your discussion?」

After leaving the Wu clan's hall, we saw two women about to walk into the house entrance with sieves in hand.

They were the wife of the clan head Mia Lei Wu, and the spouse of the eldest son Sati Lei Wu.

Inside the sieves were a pile of pico leaves, they were probably drying them in the sun.

By the way, the necklace of tusks and horns hanging on their chest numbered three again.

「Both of your faces are scary, did our clan head make some boring taunts again?」

Mia Lei Wu was about my parent's age, and a rather plump mother.

Even someone from the relatively wealthy Wu clan had to work hard everyday. Even though I described her as plump, she wasn't fat because of laziness, she was just big boned.

Other than being big boned, her body was filled with muscles, and covered with an adequate amount of fats. Her arms and shoulders were fleshy, even though she was shorter than me, she was definitely stronger.

I met this mother earlier, but it's the first time I met Sati Lei Wu today. She smiled and said:

「Long time no see.」

「Welcome to the Wu clan, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa house. What brings you here today?」

The young wife has a head of bright brown hair and dark eyes. She was about twenty, and I couldn't tell she was already a mother with her slim figure and fine features.

「Well, how should I put this —— Isn't the Lutim house having a pre-wedding celebration three days later? I will be tending to the hearth that night.」

「Really!？」

After I gave this answer, the two housewives leaned forth with sparkling eyes.

「Our eccentric clan head actually agreed to this!? But that grilled poitan made Donda dumbstruck after all. He probably wants to pretend that grilled poitan is invented by him, and boast about it to the Lutim house members.」

「Mia Lei, I'm looking forward to it! Leina and Rimee worked hard, but their cooking can't compare with Asuta at all. And that tender kiba meat—— will you cook it for us again?」

「Please look forward to it on the actual day. No matter what, my cooking won't lose to the previous time.」

The two of them were as gleeful as little girls.

I didn't need to tell that discomforting agreement to these two innocent housewives. After all, my intentions was to not leave any shadow of disharmony in the Wu clan.

By the way—— The spouses of Donda Wu and Jiza Wu we just met were actually so cheerful and gentle. The thought of this makes me feel complicated.

In order to gift blessing onto the women for them to have a safe life, parents and husbands would gift them with kiba tusks and horns. The new tusks and horns hanging on their chest were probably gifted to them by their spouses.

The tense battle atmosphere just now was too different from the happy family scene before me, which made my head feel giddy.

「... Why do you look so troubled?」

Someone whispered into my ear and poked my flank.

Ai Fa was right by my side. She glared at me and said:

「Don't worry, you just need to satisfy that eccentric man with your cooking.」

Even though she was glaring at me, her gaze no longer had those emotional fire, and her expression was warmer than usual.

She had already gotten over it, which almost made me sigh.

But—— Ai Fa really trust me, she wasn't worried about me losing to Donda Wu at all.

If I lose, she would be dragged down along with me. However, she was already resolved to do so. There wasn't any doubts or hesitation in Ai Fa's face.

Damn it! Why are you so strong, Ai Fa?!

I thought while the depths of my belly was boiling over like a pot of kiba meat soup.

It wasn't a negative feeling.

It was a soup that condenses my fighting spirit, and means: 「I definitely won't lose!」

However, my real enemy wasn't Donda Wu.

The adversary was my past self—— I had to defeat that shallow thinking and arrogant self, who caused this dissatisfying result, and take back my honor.

「... Don't let out such an aura. If you are so hyped up now, can you last for three days?」

She poked my flank again.

We were close enough to whisper, so her long blonde hair had been brushing against my cheek the whole time.

After calming down, I finally realized that we were too close to each other.

Just as I was thinking that and shift my gaze back, the housewives were looking at us with innocent smiles.

I felt embarrassed and pulled an adequate distance away from Ai Fa.

「B-By the way, what is Rimee Wu doing? I haven't seen her today.」

「Rimee? Strange? She was just with us, I even told her that you two are visiting us... Hey, Rimee?」

Mia Lei Wu shouted confusedly.

I looked around me, noticed that Ai Fa's gaze was fixed in one direction and followed her line of sight——

A red head was peeking out from behind a wall to the side, but hid quickly again.

「Ara, she's over there? Thanks for your help, Rimee. We are done over here, so you can go play with Ai Fa and Asuta.」

The two ladies bidded farewell with a look, and went off to the other end of the house.

Grandma Jiba was still napping, and it would be a while before she wakes. Hence, the Wu clan permitted us to stay for the time being. We spent an hour to get here, so I hope to chat with Rimee Wu a little.

But Rimee Wu only showed her fluffy red hair from the shadows of the wall, and didn't want to come near.

「Rimee Wu, what are you doing? Is this some sort of game in Forest's Edge?」

After I asked that, Ai Fa looked at me with cold eyes and called out to her:

「Rimee Wu.」

Rimee Wu remained unmoved.

「...Asuta, what's that?」 Ai Fa pointed behind me.

「Hmm?」

When I turned around, I heard the 'patapata' sound of footsteps.

When I turned back, Rimee Wu was hugging Ai Fa tightly.

Rimee Wu's petite hands wrapped around Ai Fa's slender waist over her cape, and her small head pressed against Ai Fa's breasts.

「That hurts! Rimee Wu, stop.」 Ai Fa said with her face blushing a little.

Really? Though it didn't look painful at all. That's what I want to say, but I didn't want to be kicked by her, so I held my peace.

「Rimee Wu, long time no see. I thought you will come and visit the Fa house. How have you been?」

I greeted her for a smile.

The next instant, Rimee Wu shivered, her back shaking as she stood stiffly.

「What's the matter? Did you forget my face?」

Rimee Wu clinged tightly to Ai Fa's chest, and turned slowly towards me.

She looked at me timidly, and her face —— was terrified.

She wasn't just terrified, her face was redder than Ai Fa.

Rimee Wu's round eyes were tearful, and her lips were trembling. She was very expressive as usual, very suitable for onomatopoeia. But did she look as if she was about to cry?

「Asuta...」

「Hmm?」

「Asuta, did you see me naked?」

I was shocked, as if the a bolt of judgement from the gods hit me right in the head.

「W-W-What are you saying, Rimee Wu? W-W-What naked?」

「… Asuta, didn't you peek at the girls bathing? Did you use that chance to see Rimee's naked body?」

She's referring to what happened in the morning ten days ago!?

After that incident, I busied myself researching cooking every day, and had already shoved my memory about it into a drawer in my brain—— but it wasn't so for this child?

No, no matter what, Rimee Wu was just a seven or eight years old little girl! Never mind the other girls, making such a young child show such a tearful expression —— I felt like a complete criminal!

I shouted with all my might once again:

「I only saw Ai Fa's naked body!」

Ai Fa didn't kick my leg this time, but my butt.

It was a roundhouse kick she put her weight into, and I thought my pelvic bone would crack.

A few minutes later, we headed to the stove room behind the house.

The men should have gone off to the forest by now, so I managed to avoid Darum Wu whom I had bad blood with.

「… Didn't we already agreed? We can't let Donda Wu or the other family members know about this, and you actually shouted so loudly right in front of the house!」

Ai Fa scolded me angrily. Rimee Wu was still hanging tightly to her left arm.

Her face was slightly red because these unnecessary memories had been dug up.

「I only claim to have seen you naked, so there's no problem... Wah, sorry, spare me! If you kick me again, I won't be able to walk any more!」

「Hmmp!」

After looking at Ai Fa's red face, Rimee Wu's face turned even redder and said softly:

「Asuta, did you only see Ai Fa naked? Will you become Ai Fa's husband?」

She spoke quietly, but it was clear to us.

「I don't need a husband, and I won't permit a jerk who breaks the taboo to be my husband!」

Give me a break. I will reflect for the entire day like a real criminal.

As we were chatting, we reached the back of the house.

After greeting Grandma Ditto Min who just finished chopping wood, we moved on ahead and found two girls in front of the kitchen, working hard on something.

They were the second sister Leina Wu and the third sister Lala Wu.

They had placed a large board onto the ground, laid a kiba pelt on top, then kept stepping on it with their bare feet. They circled in a clockwise manner, as if they were chasing each other's shadows. This must be one of the tasks necessary for making fur rug.

As I was thinking that—— Leina Wu noticed us with her blue eyes and widened them.

Her lovely face was turned rose colored.

Leina Wu had brown skin, so how could her skin turn rose colored? Anyway, her face was beet red. Leina Wu bowed her head slightly as she stomped on, and the third sister Lala Wu appeared before us next.

She was middle school age (which doesn't exist in this world). And she was always showing a haughty attitude, so she wouldn't react so strongly —— this faint expectation I bore fell completely short.

Her face that was beginning to change from that of a child to a teenager turned red with an amazing speed. She furrowed her brows fiercely, bared her white teeth and reached for the knife on her waist as she came towards me barefooted.

「How dare you show yourself so shamelessly before us!? Your luck has run out, hand over your life!」

「Y-You can't, Lala! Look, Grandma Ditto Min is right there! If you cause a ruckus, then... then what happened that morning will be exposed...?」

While Leina Wu was struggling to restrain Lala Wu's arm, her face turned redder as she shy away even further.

Leina Wu tied her hair in a low twin tail, and was a petite, lovable and charming girl with a well proportioned figure.

On the other hand, Lala Wu tied her hair in a high ponytail, and was already taller than her elder sister. She looked as strong as a boy, and was a really cute girl.

The sisters whose appearance contrasted with each other were blushing and losing their composure because of embarrassment.

Even though I would be kicked, I want to use this chance to clarify the misunderstanding. When I was about to speak, Rimee Wu did so before me:

「H-Hey everyone! Asuta only saw Ai Fa's naked body! S-So, we don't need to marry him!」

The sisters froze in place.

Their faces remained red from embarrassment, with different emotions flashing in their eyes as one glared at me, and the other looked at me.

「It's true! I only saw Ai...」

I was hit midway.

She hit my forehead with her palm, a refreshing new move.

It gave me a mild concussion, and I held onto the wall of the kitchen house and groaned.

「...Asuta, watch your tongue.」

I started reflecting on my actions after seeing Ai Fa's expression from my blurry vision.

How could I sacrifice Ai Fa's sense of shame for the sake of soothing the other girls? Who was the most important person to me? It was Ai Fa. Ah, I'm such an idiot. In order to protect myself, I relied on Ai Fa's strong personality.

I wanted to apologize to Ai Fa properly, but I couldn't do that as my world was spinning.



Part 3

「…Erm, I'm really sorry about what happened a few days ago. I swear that I didn't see any of you unclothed. But I wish to apologize again for the stress I caused to your mental well-being.」

Several seconds later, I bowed to the women of the Wu clan after I recovered from my concussion.

The three women, Leina, Lala and Rimee, stood in a row according to their age before me. All three had different expressions——

Leina Wu was at a loss.

Lala Wu was furious.

Rimee Wu smiled bashfully.

But despite their differing expression, all of them looked deeply embarrassed.

Leaving Ai Fa aside for now, I really didn't see the bodies of these girls, so why should I feel so guilty then? It was a little illogical, but I still made these young girls panic, and that was a heavy crime. This only happened because of my carelessness and foolishness, I lowered my head in apology.

「E-Excuse me! Please don't be so bothered by this, Jiza-nii already told us the entire story. You only acted that way because of Ludo's prank, right?」

Of the three, Leina Wu appears the most embarrassed. I felt even worse when I saw her speaking up for me.

「Hmmp! Jiza-nii is too naive! He should have gouged his eyes out and leave him in the forest! The monta that eats rotten meat will finish him up cleanly, and we can pretend that none of this happened!」

Lala Wu said something really chilling, but her blushing face still stirred up my feelings of guilt.

「B-But Asuta isn't a liar! He definitely didn't see us naked...! This is embarrassing, let's just take that he is telling the truth.」

What Rimee Wu said made me speechless. The thought that I caused some mental trauma in the heart of this little girl make me feel like killing myself.

「… Women of the Wu clan, let's stop this. I can only apologize for my family member's foolishness. I came to visit the Wu clan because I wish to tell you all something.」

After her blush faded away, Ai Fa's face was colder than usual as she spoke to mediate.

「Ai Fa, you have something to tell us?」

The eldest of the girls present, Leina Wu asked. Ai Fa nodded a little and said:

「Yes. Before that, aren't you working? I will feel bad if I disturb your work, so I hope you can listen to me as you work.」

「Alright, we will get back to our task——」 The elder sister patted away the dirt on her feet, and started stamping away at the pelt.

「Why are you doing that?」

When I asked that, Leina who had finally reverted to her usual pure and innocent self answered:

「Because the pelt will turn soft after we stamp on it.」

I wanted to learn more about making fur rugs, but we still have matters to attend to. The other party only permit us to stay until Grandma Jiba wakes up, so our time here was limited.

「It has been ten days since Asuta tended to the hearth. How are your meals so far? Is Jiba Wu lively?」

「Yes! Grandma Jiba will eat a lot and take many small bites... But our cooking still isn't as good as Asuta.」

Rimee Wu answered:

「Everyone is good in grilling poitan now. But even Leina-nee can't make that hamburg thing well. After grilling it, the meat will sometimes break apart, get burnt or remain raw inside... And it still have a stench! Both the grilled hamburg and the soup without poitan have the stench of kiba in them.」

「Have you tried washing the meat?」

「Yes! We did what you said, and wash the meat with salt water! But there will still be some lingering stench.」

I did tell them the way to remove the stench, but if bloodletting wasn't performed when hunting the kiba, it will be hard to remove the stench completely. I have confirmed this in the Fa house too.

「How annoying! I think that Leina-nee will get better with more practice, but Papa Donda won't permit it. He even chided us about wasting kiba meat to play, how mean. And so, we will only grill hamburg steak for Grandma Jiba.」

「I can't do it as well as Asuta after all. Asuta, you are amazing!」

Leina Wu's black pupils sparkled like a scene from a shoujo manga.

I felt honored, but a stare coming from another side was pricking at me painfully.

「We still have so much meat left at home! Uggh~ I want to eat hamburg steak. I don't want to eat jerky anymore, I want to eat hamburg steak all the time!」

「That's right Rimee, I feel the same too.」

Leina Wu showed a lonely smile.

I felt a little scared when I looked at this pair of sisters.

How should I put this —— hamburg steak was much more addictive than I imagined.

Donda Wu and Jiza Wu didn't like the hamburg steak, but Rimee Wu, Leina Wu and the others were completely captivated by it. For the denizens of Forest's Edge, the tender meat they knew of was the meat in kiba soup that had been boiled into a mush. When they tasted the hamburg steak, the new sensation and texture was too strong a stimuli for them.

My next dish will shatter their fantasy towards hamburg steaks —— such a thought rose in my heart once again.

「But I have something to ask you. When the Wu clan grill meat, how do you handle the meat?」

「Handle them? We just swish swish swish and cut them up.」

I didn't understand at all.

Leina Wu helped her explain:

「Just like what you did, we will cut the meat off from the bones, slice them into thin slices and grill them. We will leave the white fats evenly on each piece.」

In that case, the way they prepare the kiba meat was the same as how pork and boar meat were prepared in my original world. Aside from the outer layer, the thigh meat of the kiba didn't have much fats. If the meat were cut from the outside in like what Ai Fa did, only the lean meat would be left by the mid point.

「By the way, how thin did you slice them?」

「Ehh...? About this thin.」

It was slightly less than a centimeter. I could understand, it was hard to slice raw meat after all.

Also, she didn't use one hand, but both of them to show the thickness of the meat, how sly. Because Leina Wu looked innocent and cute, she was very endearing when she acts like this. I couldn't help smiling, and a sharp gaze pricked my cheek——

「Asuta, why did you ask?」

「Hmm? Well, it's just for reference. Because I will be tending to the hearth here three days later.」

「Ehh, really!?」 「Is that true!?」 Of the three girls, two of them were overjoyed like the housewives earlier.

Only the third sister had a look of disgust, and said angrily as she stomped on:

「What, that guy's tending to the hearth again? Whatever, just don't let me eat that mushy meat again.」

She was disguising her rant against me in the form of muttering to herself.

I turned my head towards her quietly.

But she was always on the move, so it was hard to meet her gaze.

The third sister of the Wu clan, Lala Wu. Of all the women, she was the only one who didn't acknowledge my cooking.

I wouldn't change my plan even if she told me her opinion. Even so, I still want to hear her thoughts.

「Lala Wu, I want to ask you. Instead of tender meat, do you prefer tougher ones like the men?」

「What?」

She shot her gaze my way.

Her face had calmed down, but it was blushing a little again. So her eyes weren't that frightening.

「What, peeping tom. Can you not talk to me so causally?」

「L-Let's not talk about that for now. I might be an apprentice, but I'm still a chef. To me, what the customers think is very important. Of everyone here, your comments are the most specific, so I hope you can tell me what you think.」

「What do you mean, tending to the hearth is a woman's job, right?」

「Not so for my country. Most of the chef there are men.」

For a short while, Lala Wu kept a straight face and stepped silently.

Finally, she glared at me with a red face and said:

「What!? Are you going to stay here until I say something!? I don't want to talk to a peeping tom like you!」

「Ehh? I can apologize as much as you want for that incident! But, can you help me?」

「... No matter how many times you apologize, I still feel embarrassed.」

She lowered her head a little and bit on her lips.

Maybe... This girl was the same type as Ai Fa.

When I was thinking that, the gaze on my left cheek intensified.

My body broke out in cold sweat and I continued:

「I-I will be going home soon. Before that, can you tell me your thoughts? I remember that you said the grilled poitan and soup aren't bad?」

「You are really noisy! I just hate that gooey meat! I think that thing sprinkled on top of the meat is like warm fruit wine and taste nice. The aria is crunchy and delicious! But the important thing is the kiba meat, the kiba meat!」

She yelled in reckless abandon and direct her piercing gaze towards me.

She was still blushing red.

「What do you want? Are you angry because I didn't offer you my blessing? That can't be helped! I really hate that meat... I wanted to bless you for saving Grandma Jiba, but if all the girls side with you, Papa will be humiliated! That's right! In the end, it's the fault of Leina-nee who was the first one to bless you!」

「E-Ehh? Me?」

「Sorry, but sisters shouldn't fight...?」

「You must have wooed Leina-nee when you two were cooking together, right? That's why she gift you her blessings first. Leina-nee, you always look so serious, but act so underhandedly!」

「That's not true! I really think it tastes delicious!」

「Erm, like I said...」

「I think it's delicious too!」

「Rimee brat, shut up! Let me say this first Leina-nee. Men are only trying to get on your good side because of your thicc figure! If you don't marry while your tummy is still flat, you will be left on the shelf.」

「W-Why must you say something so mean!? And right in front of Asuta too, how mean!」

「I'm not a brat! Lala you tomboy!」

Ahhh... They're not stopping at all.

And the gaze on my left cheek turned sharper and colder. Was she pushing the blame for everything that happened today under my name?

「... What are you quarreling about?」

At this moment, the messiah appeared!

It was the youngest brother Ludo Wu!

「Guests, Grandma Jiba is awake... Enough already. That's why I want you to pick one of them and marry into the family.」

「Shut up, Ludo!」 「T-That's rude, Ludo!」 「Bratty Ludo get lost!」 Even after hearing the choir of protest, Ludo Wu just waved his hand and said: 「Ah ~ noisy...」 and was unfazed. He gestured at Ai Fa and me with his chin, asking us to follow him.

His expression was solemn today. The quiver and bow slung on his left shoulder mean he was about to head into the forest.

I yelled at Lala Wu who was gritting her teeth:

「Lala Wu, I won't serve mushy meat next time, and will prepare something with more bite. Look forward to it..」

「Shut up! No matter what you serve up, I will never gift you my blessing!」

With that parting shout, we headed to the entrance of the room.

「... Are you eyeing for a brat like Lala? She's two years younger than me, and can only marry after three more years.」

「I-I don't plan to do that! Can you please change the topic?」

The mistress of my house was staring at the back of my head now, and it felt just like a steel blade. Ludo Wu, even though you were the one who dragged me into this mess, I didn't want to pursue your crimes. But please, stop using the term 'marry' right now.

「Hmmp ~ whatever!」 After saying that, he used his lean and strong arm and put me into a side headlock.

「If you prefer Lala over Vena-nee or Leina-nee, then just lay your hands on her... But if you lay a finger on the brat Rimee, I will kill you.」

I could feel genuine killing intent within his quiet voice.

I could only pray that Rimee Wu's future husband candidates may rest in peace.

And then—— when I walked casually outside of the house, I stopped in my tracks with a gasp.

Standing before the house weren't the men from the Wu main house, but over 20 《kiba hunting》 warriors.

「Ludo, you are back—— Good, alright men! Like usual, we will plunder lives from the forest today!」

Ohh—— The men's roar seemed to shake the very earth.

All of them wore kiba fur and a large sabre at their waist. Some of them brought arrows or javelins. There were old men and youths about Ludo Wu's age. A few had bandages on their head, and there was even a man whose arm was bent the wrong way.

Without doubt, they were the hunters of Forest's Edge.

The young and the old, fit and wounded, all of them had a fire burning in their eyes like beasts. A glaring fighting spirit burned within them, and they headed into the woods.

And standing before them was of course, the clan head Donda Wu, but he ignored our presence.

「I'm going off now!」 Ludo Wu ran towards the group after this parting words. His eyes were just like a beast.

The figure of these hunters inspire valor just like a scene out of a mythological tale—— for a while, I couldn't speak or move.

「... They are the men from the Wu branch family, they are also living in this village.」

Ai Fa put her hand on my shoulder gently.

I turned back unconsciously—— She was probably affected by the men's aura, when she looked at me, there was a blue flame burning in her eyes.

「They are Donda Wu's younger brothers and their sons, as well as the younger brothers of Donda Wu's parents and their scions. All of them are led by the head of Wu's main house, Donda Wu.」

Her fiery cat like eyes looked right into my eyes.

「And there are six kin house that follows the Wu clan. They are Lutim, Mamu, Min, Lei, Lilim and Mufa. Numbering over a hundred in total... Asuta, does that frighten you? What you are doing is taunting this group of men.」

「No—— it should be fine.」

I replied. I probably succeeded in squeezing out a smile:

「Don't worry, I'm more convinced about what I need to do next. I probably —— am doing the right thing.」

Ai Fa raised her brow in surprise.

She then showed a brave smile, something she rarely did. She also did something she usually won't do—— ruffling my head that was wrapped in a towel.

Part 4

It was almost time to visit Grandma Jiba. They had permitted us to visit her, but it was a taboo to step into someone's house without being ushered by a family member.

Maybe Rimee Wu was still squabbling with her sisters and was nowhere to be found. The older women who had gone to sun the pico leaves were gone too. Aside from Grandma Jiba, was there anyone else at home? With no idea how the situation was, I could only call out: 「Excuse me, is there anyone home?」

Someone was home.

We have not met three members of the Wu clan. Aside from the second brother Darum Wu, there were two others. After we called out, the two of them appeared after the door at the entrance opened.

One of them was —— the baby Kota Wu.

And the eldest sister Vena Wu who was standing at the other side of the door in surprise. Kota Wu was being held tightly in her voluptuous chest.

To me, this was an awkward reunion.

Before that nude incident, I rejected her temptation with all my might.

With how open she was, she shouldn't be too embarrassed about someone peeking at her bathing —— When I was thinking about that, her cheeks that was as smooth as porcelain turned bright red.

Hey hey hey, weren't you a femme fatale who took the initiative to expose your body to me!? While I was screaming futilely in my heart, Vena Wu used the baby wrapped in a blanket to cover half of her face. Her dreamy eyes had signs of shame, and her body started squirming as if she was trying to avoid my gaze painfully.

「Ah, it's Asuta... Ai Fa too... I was thinking who was visiting, so it's the two of you... I-I'm watching over Kota in Sati-lei's place, and didn't notice at all...」

Her voice turned high pitched.

Like before, her body gives off plenty of pheromones, filled with sexiness and charm. But, how should I put this? This sexy big sister was squirming her body from embarrassment, but trying her best to look nonchalant —— what troubled me was that she didn't seem to be pretending at all.

「E-Erm... Jiza-nii told me what actually happened, so I understand... Sorry. Erm, can you not stare at me...」

Towards the end, Vena-nee even used the baby to conceal her entire face.

Kota Wu has his mother's eyes. He looked straight at me, and made baby noises with his head tilt.

Don't! Don't look at me today with such innocent eyes!

「Y-You're here to visit Grandma Jiba, right? She is in her bedroom. This way please...」

Vena-nee didn't walk with her usual sassiness, but rushed inside hurriedly.

I was surprised. When I turned back, I saw Ai Fa looking at me with an icy stare.

「L-Let's go and visit Grandma Jiba.」

I didn't think I needed to be this panicky, but I couldn't calm my heart.

No matter what, we should visit Grandma Jiba first.

There were two passages to either the left or the right of room, and Vena Wu headed down the one to the right. The straight corridor wasn't wide, allowing just two people to walk side by side. There were three doors along this 10 metres corridor.

If the left corridor had the same structure, then there would be six rooms in this house.

It was wider than I imagined. In that case, even a large family of twelve plus one baby could live comfortably here without needing to sleep in one large communal hall.

Vena Wu opened the innermost door and stood squeamishly before it.

「Grandma Jiba, sorry for intruding.」 After Ai Fa said that, she quickly went in.

Then I will—— As I was about to follow Ai Fa, something I sort of expect happened. Vena Wu grabbed the hem at my waist.

She acted so panicky to make me let my guard down, how was she planning to tempt me? I turned around guardedly to find Vena Wu with her head down. I almost couldn't see her first, and her moist eyes stared at me through the brown fringe of her hair.

「A-Aside from the engagement promise, you have to follow the rules of Forest's Edge too, alright...?」

If I only heard these words alone, I would have thought this was a declaration of love.

But her movements looked so frail, like an inexperienced weak girl roleplaying as a femme fatale. I didn't know how to react after hearing her declaration.

「Erm... Why are you acting like this since just now?」

In order to not let my voice be heard inside the other room, I kept my voice down and asked her back. Vena Wu's shoulders trembled again, and she covered her face with Kota Wu once more.

Stop abusing the baby.

「I-I told you to not look at me... I-I will let you off today...」 Vena Wu squeezed these words out and hurried away along the passageway.

I was exhausted, and after entering the room with weak strides, I pulled the door close behind me.

Ai Fa was already chatting with Grandma Jiba.

「Oh, it's Asuta...? Thank you for coming, I'm really glad...」

The Grand Elder's eyes and her smile was as pure as a baby, which made the me today feel even more terrible.

And of course, I couldn't tell her that. I walked forth and knelt beside Ai Fa.

The room was about six tatami wide.

As for furnitures, there was a large shelf, with unfamiliar fruits, faggots of twigs, animal bones, wooden mask and other decor. Aside from these, there wasn't anything else.

Grandma Jiba sat on a bed with several layers of sheets, beautiful colored shawls covered her shoulders and feet.

As the weather here was similar to a tropical rainforest, the temperature during the day was similar to Japan in early summer. However, the thoughts of such a petite old woman sleeping in such a barren room gives me the chills.

「... At night, Ditto Min will sleep here with me. Her husband passed away a long time ago...」

She seemed to have seen through my thoughts, which surprised me.

With the help of Ai Fa, Grandma Jiba sat up, and held my hand with her hands that looked like dried twigs.

She was an old lady filled with wrinkles, and looked like a small monkey.

Her stature should be rather small even before she lived to this ripe age.

Although her slit-like eyes were almost covered by her drooping eyelids, there was still a glimmer of sense in them. On her face that was like a prune, she showed a kind and warm expression.

Compared to the last time I met her, Grandma Jiba was more lively.

That makes me glad.

「Asuta and Ai Fa, thank you for what you did last time... since that day, I have been eating properly. It wasn't as delicious as your cooking, but Leina and Rimee worked hard...」

「That is wonderful. I'm happy to see you acting so energetic too, Grandma Jiba.」

Ai Fa was still expressionless, but her eyes were unlike her usual self and filled with a warm glow.

When we ran into the Wu Clan going off for their campaign, Ai Fa's eyes had an intense flame. But her expression was gone like a dream, along with the cold eyes glaring at me earlier.

「...It was rare to see Donda drop by. Are you visiting the Wu clan three nights later...?」

「Yes, we will be tending to the hearth again. Asuta will serve you something delicious!」

Ai Fa glanced at me.

「You are indeed a man who excels in cooking.」

She didn't say 「only excels in cooking」, was it out of sympathy?

「I will do my best to serve you enjoyable meals!」 I replied politely.

「I'm glad... But that night is the pre-wedding celebration for the Lutim house, correct? Donda told me that with a smile...」

After saying that—— Her eyes that were almost covered by her eyelids shone with a clear light, and she alternated her gaze between me and Ai Fa.

「Ai Fa... Just what is Donda scheming...?」

「Scheming?」

「The head of the Lutim house and Donda have similar personalities, they both have brusque personalities, like the giant apes lurking in the southern forest... If you serve the same dish as last time before this group of hot blooded men, he will definitely be more triggered than Donda, and the feast will become a mess...」

「... He probably wish to see Asuta and me being humiliated? Because Donda Wu detest us a lot.」

「Detest... Because you rejected his proposal right, Ai Fa...?」

Grandma Jiba fixed her gaze on Ai Fa.

Ai Fa frowned a little painfully.

「It can't be helped, women have the right to pick their husbands too... But Donda must like you a lot last time. If not, he wouldn't have asked you to marry his cherished son. He probably admires the way you bravely fought back against the Tsun clan successor... But you turned down his proposals and insist on living on as a kiba hunter...」

「.....」

「I'm not blaming you... You just need to live in the way you deem right... But Donda takes pride in being a hunter, and arrogant about being a man. He thinks the women's job of watching over the family is important too... That's why he can't stand seeing you choose the path of a hunter even though you are a woman...」

「.....」

「Ai Fa, that is an important night for the Wu clan, and Donda is asking you to tend to the hearth that night... what is he scheming...?」

Her eyes very clear, and after hearing her question, no one could turn her down.

Hence, Ai Fa bit her lips tightly like a child, and finally said:

「If we can't satisfy Donda Wu and the head of the Lutim house, Donda Wu says he will declare the Wu clan is breaking ties with the Fa house.」

Grandma Jiba was silent for a moment.

Finally, she said quietly 「I see...」 She then closed her eyes and repeated 「I see...」

「Ai Fa, and Asuta, can't you reject this condition...?」

「That's impossible. We might be the ones who brought it up, but Donda Wu added this term himself.」

Ai Fa said with a firm and strong voice.

Grandma Jiba slowly turned her gaze towards me and said:

「I see... I didn't expect things to get so serious. But it's too late to do anything about it now. And I think this is necessary for the Wu clan.」

After thinking about it, I answered:

「I originally thought of such a tedious plan because of my competitiveness and my pride. But there is more reason than that now. For the sake of the Wu clan, I hope Donda Wu can acknowledge me... It's difficult to express in words, but that was how I feel.」

「I see...」 Grandma Jiba muttered again.

「This must be the right path for you... In that case, my old bones... If that child Donda really act so heartlessly, I will leave the Wu clan...」

「Eh?」

「I'm saying that I will abandon the family name of Wu... Head of the Fa house Ai Fa, if I do that, will you be willing to accept me into the Fa house...?」

「Grandma J-Jiba, what are you saying!? How can I do that!」

Of all the time I had spent with Ai Fa, I have probably not seen her look so frantic.

It was normal to react this way, I was surprised too.

However—— I could understand the implication of what Grandma Jiba said.

「Ara ara, are you going to turn away a homeless old lady...? If I leave the Wu house, and the Fa house abandons me, then my remains will just be exposed to the wild...」

「I'm saying you don't need to do this! Why must you leave the Wu clan? That's too strange!」

「It's not strange at all... If the Wu clan declare that they are breaking ties with the Fa house, I won't be able to see you like this again, correct? And the Tsun clan will be even more bold, and they might do terrible things to you... This old bones won't allow that to happen...」

「Even so, you don't need to leave this house! Even if you are here, those people from the Tsun clan will still——」

「The one I disapprove of isn't the Tsun clan, but Donda who forced you to bear such a fate...」

Grandma Jiba said softly, but her voice was very clear.

「Donda's father is my son, and my blood flows in my grandson's veins. If he made such a declaration, it would force you into a terrible fate, I can't permit him to do that... That's why I want to break off my ties with the Wu clan, that's all...」

「That's too foolish... What about Rimee Wu? Leina Wu? Jiza Wu? Your blood flow in their veins too, aren't they your important family members too?」

Ai Fa's face was on the verge of tears.

「Of course, they are all my important family. Be it Jiza, Vena, Darum, Leina, Ludo, Lala, Rimee, Kota... Or the wife of the former clan head Ditto Min, Donda's wife Mia Lei, Jiza's wife Sati Lei, everyone is my important family... However, Donda is the clan head. If I don't wish to follow the clan head's orders, I can only leave this house...」

「I already said...」 Ai Fa was choking up by now.

A drop of tear she couldn't hold back fell from her eyes.

「Donda says he will break off ties with the Fa house, and I will never allow that. Doing that is a huge mistake... As the Grand Elder of the Wu clan, I have to let Donda know this is the wrong choice through action...」

Grandma Jiba wiped away Ai Fa's tears with the tip of her finger.

「And that's why, leaving this house is my only choice... do you understand, Asuta?」

「I sort of understand.」

When I answered that way, Ai Fa glared at me with scary eyes.

But I didn't intend to take back my words.

「No, you are an amazing person and I don't think I can understand you so easily. However, if I switch places with you—— If my family wants to do something awful to a person I care strongly about, I won't permit that either. I don't know if I'm strong enough to leave my own family, but I understand why you think this way.」

「Asuta, you——」 Ai Fa grabbed my shirt by the chest.

But her grip was weak. I covered her hands in mine and said:



「Ai Fa, Rimee Wu might think the same way as Jiba Wu. Do you think she will permit her own father destroying the life of Ai Fa who she likes the most? Rimee Wu will leave her family together with Jiba Wu —— even if she can't do that, she will hate her father for the rest of her life.」

Ai Fa's face turned green from shock.

Her sullen face breaks my heart, but I continued:

「We agreed to a match with serious consequences. If you don't wish to see that happen, we should give up on this match even if it means humiliation. That will mean... we are only concerned with our own glory and life.」

Especially Ai Fa.

Ai Fa need to understand how much she was loved by the people around her.

“No matter what happens to her, no one will feel hurt or angry.” She spent two years believing such a fact.

I think her strong personality was impressive, and I respect her tenacious soul that remained uncorrupted despite her solitude.

However—— Ai Fa made a mistake.

Even if she ostracized herself, Ai Fa still cares about Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu. If that was so, then the other party might feel the same for Ai Fa as strongly too. Ai Fa needs to realize that.

Only someone who couldn't care about others would obtain true solitude.

If she possess a heart capable of loving others, than she shouldn't expect to live a lonely life.

「...Ai Fa, what we need to do remains the same.」

I grabbed Ai Fa's hands tightly.

「We need to win this match and earn Donda Wu's acknowledgement. Then no one will get hurt. Jiba Wu won't leave her family and Rimee Wu won't hate her father. I just need to cook a delicious meal and satisfy Donda Wu.」

If we apologize to Donda Wu right now, we might lose our honor, reputation and standing, but we wouldn't lose Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu.

However —— I don't think that was enough.

I hope to get along with the Wu clan in a better way.

After visiting then and meeting quite a number of them, this feelings had grown stronger.

「Asuta, can you tell which is the right way...?」

Grandma Jiba muttered softly. I turned to her and smiled as steadily as I could and said:

「I don't know if this is the right way, but the only thing I can do is prepare a delicious meal. Jiba Wu, please look forward to dinner three nights from now.」

Chapter 4 - Culinary path of a Half baked chef

Part 1

This day has finally come.

Tonight, the Wu clan will be hosting guests from the Lutim house for a pre-wedding celebration.

In Forest's Edge, during the seven days before the wedding, friends and relatives will usually hold a private celebration ahead of the main event.

Tomorrow, it would be with the groom's family, the Lutim house. The day after tomorrow would be the bride's Min house. The day after that would be with their closely related Lei house...

They will be celebrating several days in a row.

I felt like saying 「thank you for your hard work」 to the newly wedded couple. But personally, tonight was more important to me.

The first day of the pre-celebrations would be held in the house with the highest standings among all their kins—— which is the Wu clan that is hosting them tonight.

I had to tend to the hearth tonight, a heavy responsibility to bear.

On top of that, Ai Fa and I made a pact with Donda Wu.

If my cooking couldn't satisfy Donda Wu and the head of the Lutim house, then the Wu clan and all their kin house would break ties with the Fa house.

If the Wu clan declare they would sever all ties with the Fa house, the successor of the Tsun clan Diga Tsun might assault Ai Fa again.

If Donda Wu follow through with his announcements and force Ai Fa to face such a terrible fate, then the Grand Elder of the Wu clan Jiba Wu will leave her house and become a Fa member.

The Wu clan's youngest daughter Rimee Wu cherish Ai Fa deeply just like Jiba Wu, so there was no telling how much pain that would cause her.

With how messy the entire affair has become, I couldn't help sighing.

But there was only one thing I could do now——

Prepare a delicious meal and earn Donda Wu's recognition.

「Everyone, I will be in your care today.」

I bowed deeply to everyone in the Wu clan's stove room.

A white towel was wrapped around my hair that had grown slightly longer. I wore a white T-shirt with an aladdin-like vest draped over it. Eight pieces of blessing glimmered on my neck along with a necklace of kili fruit. I had an exotic waistband and wore white shoes. My body had gotten used to this mixed dressing.

On the working table was the Santoku knife that had been imbued with my dad's soul.

All preparations were complete and I was revving to go.

Ai Fa stood beside me, with three ladies standing opposite us.

They were Donda Wu's wife——Mia Lei Wu.

Their eldest daughter, Vena Wu.

And their second daughter, Leina Wu.

A total of three ladies.

「Only Leina Wu assisted me the last time.」

「Yes...! Today is actually Lala's turn, but she felt unmotivated, and I hope Asuta can teach me more cooking skills... So I switched tomorrow's shift with her.」

「That's a big help, just having one more person understand the procedure would raise the efficiency onto a different level.」

I wasn't saying that out of courtesy, but a logical reasoning. But Leina Wu blushed and Ai Fa shot her icy gaze at me sideways.

However, I had made up my mind and won't be distracted.

And of course, I didn't take things easily because of any distractions the last time I tended to the hearth. But I have decided to take on this challenge with an unfaltering spirit.

After all —— the fate of several people were tied to my culinary performance tonight.

「What? You mean we are not reliable? How rude! In terms of tending to the hearth, I won't lose out to Leina Wu.」

The one laughing boldly was the spouse of that scary Donda Wu, Mia Lei Wu.

Her skeletal frame was big and she had a plump figure. There were bits of white hair mixed in her red hair, and her brown eyes were attentive and lively. The one piece long dress she was wearing signified her status as a married woman. She was a dependable mother.

Be it hair color, eye color, body shape and appearance, Vena Wu was completely unlike her mother. She was like the incarnation of sexiness, but she was just fidgeting with the fringe of her hair boredly right now.

Her eyes were sleepy, lips full and her body curvy and thicc, releasing large amount of pheromones. This big sister seemed to be born for the sole purpose of mesmerizing men.

When she saw me, her cheeks were no longer red, and she showed none of her natural flirtatious demeanor. Instead, her attitude was lackluster.

No matter what, from the way they looked, they probably didn't know about the blood culling pact we made with their clan head.

「Alright then, I will explain the plan for today. The number of diners are the twelve members of the Wu clan, the three guests from the Lutim house, Ai Fa and me, a total of seventeen people. I would also be serving a special dish to Jiba Wu too.」

I started explaining officially.

「Dinner tonight would be the kiba soup pot and grilled poitan that was served last time, as well as a grilled kiba dish. I will prepare hamburger steak for Jiba Wu as dinner. Erm~ I would like to know, when you cook the kiba soup for dinner, do you prepare a special meal for Jiba Wu separately so she could eat it easily?」

「Yes, to make it easier for her to eat, I will finely dice the aria and cook it in a separate pot. We will shift all the meat into our pot, since the hamburger steak has enough meat for Grandma Jiba.」

Mia Lei Wu answered with a smile.

Leina Wu leaned forward seriously, as if she didn't want to miss a single word I said. As if she was trying to balance out with Leina, Vena Wu sexily stifled a yawn.

「I see, then I will follow suit. Regarding cooking—— who is better at preparing kiba soup, or grilling poitan?」

「Leina is the best at grilling poitan. The kiba soup doesn't have much difference no matter who cooks it, but the worst at tending to the hearth is Vena here.」

「I see, then I will leave the poitan to Leina Wu, the kiba soup to Mia Lei Wu, then Vena Wu and I will prepare the meat dish and support the others..」

「... I will just be a hindrance to you. Should I change my shift with Grandma Ditto Min or Rimee...?」

This was the first time Vena Wu spoke today, and her voice sounded a little testy.

Simply put, she felt useless compared to Leina Wu and Mia Lei Wu who were proficient in the kitchen.

This big sister has a complicated personality. With that thought in mind, I smiled at her.

「No, no need for that. You are a woman of the Wu clan too, so let's work hard together. I plan to finish my own tasks too.」

「.....」

「Alright then, Leina Wu, can you please start grilling the poitan? Vena Wu, please help her carry the ingredients.」

Vena Wu really showed a testy expression this time, and left the stove room side by side with Leina Wu.

「Asuta, what should I do?」

「Mia Lei Wu, I have something to ask. Ever since I tended to the stove last time, grilled poitan would be served at dinner every night, right? When you cook the kiba soup, do you also add all sorts of ingredients from the food store in too?」

「Of course. If not, the taste wouldn't change... Actually, we couldn't remove the kiba meat stench in the kiba soup no matter what we did. So we needed to add tarapa or lilo to conceal the scent.」

「Eh? You even add lilo? Wouldn't the fragrance be too strong?」

「Thanks to that, it could more or less suppress the kiba stench... Hey, what's the deal with the meat you brought over? The hamburg is tasty, but that kiba pot that didn't have any stench really surprises me! Just what magic did you cast to turn kiba meat so delicious?」

「I didn't use any magic. I only use bloodletting immediately on the kiba I caught... But that's not the job of the women, but the responsibility of the men.」

「I see... it can't be helped then. Those stubborn men will never listen to you.」

I looked at the depressed Mia Lei Wu and continued:

「I heard that you would treat the guests more lavishly during feasts. In Forest's Edge, what is considered lavish? Do you use all sorts of ingredients in your store?」

「That's right, we will put in loads of vegetables that are more luxurious than aria and poitan into the pot. But doing so without thinking will make the entire thing unpalatable.」

「I get it. You only decide which vegetable to add after tough and thorough thought... It's fine even if it is your personal preference, but what do you think should be added into the kiba soup with less of a stench to make it tasty? 」

「Ehh? Well, Tino leaves goes well with anything. If the soup doesn't have any stench, then there's no need to add lilo and tarapa... Gigo won't work either. The entire soup would become very thick, just like adding in poitan. Even though it's a little bitter, Pula would work too. But Ludo and Lala would probably sulk at the sight of them. 」

This long string of words mixed the names of ingredients and people together. If I accidentally added Lala instead of pula into the pot, the Wu clan would be furious.

「So tino leaves and pula is better? Then let's add these two for tonight. 」

「Ehh!? Don't do that! It's a rare chance for you to come, won't it be bad if my nosiness messed up the taste!? Our guest from the Lutim house will be here too. 」

「It's fine, we need to be more adventurous. If we don't put in the effort to innovate, our cooking will never improve. 」

I glanced at Ai Fa when I said that.

Although my words were the complete opposite from my previous time tending to the hearth——Ai Fa still watched over me with her silent and strong gaze.

I told Ai Fa my plans for the cooking tonight right from the start.

Even though Ai Fa was surprised, she merely told me: 「I leave it entirely to your judgement. 」

I want to repay her trust in me.

「... By the way, how is the clan head recently? 」

Mia Lei Wu was moaning with a troubled face, but let out a funny 「Hmm? 」 sound. She seemed to be simulating the kiba soup cooking process in her mind, and I felt sorry for interrupting her thoughts.

「You are asking how the clan head is doing? Didn't you meet him just three days ago? 」

「Yes, I want to know if anything about him changed. What do you think? 」

「He is still the same... Now that you mentioned it, he looks a little grumpy since that night, and will visit Grandma Jiba in her room from time to time. Grandma Jiba has probably lectured him. 」

No, that wasn't it. Grandma Jiba knew Donda Wu's character very well, since it has come to this, she would not lecture him. The sensible Grand Elder has already decided on her path, and would have nothing to say to Donda Wu.

In that case—— Did Donda Wu went to negotiate with Grandma Jiba, and want to dismiss this foolish competition of ours? I hope so.

Donda Wu, Rimee Wu and Grandma Jiba were blood relatives—— He wasn't planning to destroy Ai Fa's life for real—— I sincerely hope that was how he thought.

No matter what, the die had been cast.

Whatever the truth might be, the thing I could do, and the thing I should do remains the same.

I stiffened my emotions again and focused on my task at hand.

「Well then, I will start preparing the meat dish. After the poitan is done, we will start cooking the soup, there is more than enough time. For the sake of Grandma Jiba, let's revise the cooking method for hamburg steak.」

After saying that, I opened the kiba meat I brought over. I only brought thigh and chuck flap meat last time, but I prepared meat from three different parts this time.

To be honest, because I worked too hard on my grill meat research, there weren't enough quantity of some parts for everyone, so Ai Fa and me might have to skip out—— I almost fell into such a pernicious situation. I didn't expect that two days ago, Ai Fa brought back that 50kg young kiba, and wiped my worries away.

And so, there were more than enough meat now. After carefully categorizing the meat, I laid them out on the work platform.

In the next instant, Mia Lei Wu asked worriedly: 「Is that meat from the kiba's torso?」

「This meat is tastier than thigh meat. We already know that the last time you tended to the hearth. However, the Lutim house will be visiting this time, isn't it better to use thigh meat?」

「Eh? The Lutim house head don't like eating meat from the torso?」

「I'm not sure about that. But since our clan head showed such a disgusted expression, then the Lutim house head will probably react the same way. And the Lutim house head is quicker to anger than our clan head, so it's better to be careful.」

He's more easily agitated than Donda Wu... how scary.

If we only use the thigh meat, there wouldn't be enough to go around, and the variety of dishes would be more bland.

「But when you and the others did not resist eating meat from the torso that much, correct? Why does Donda Wu detest it so much?」

「I have no idea why either. But Jiza and Darum did not object to what the clan head said, so there must be a good reason why the men think this way.」

A good reason for the men...

I remember Donda Wu rambling that: 「Only the montas that feast on rotten meat will eat flesh off the kiba's torso!」 For the honorable Forest's Edge hunters, they probably felt outrage that I even dare serve them that.

However, Ai Fa was a hunter too, but she had no hesitation about eating the kiba's torso.

What exactly was going on? When I turned back towards Ai Fa —— my house head had an expression even more troubled than mine. She then said with a groan:

「Mia Lei Wu, there's something I would like to ask—— Is house Lutim the next most powerful kin house right after the Wu clan?」

It was rare to see Ai Fa taking the initiative to talk to others. Mia Lei Wu looked a little happy as she nodded and replied:

「That's right, the Lutim house can rival the Wu clan, their house head Dan Lutim is also an outstanding hunter. There is no question about this.」

「I see, that's why—— they think the torso of the kiba is monta feed.」

After Ai Fa mumbled to herself, she showed a determined expression and said to me:

「Asuta, you don't need to mind this and just follow your plan. If the head of the Lutim house hates the torso of the kiba as much as Donda Wu, I can convince them otherwise.」

「Eh? Ai Fa, you know the reason why they hate that body part?」

「Yes, I can understand... Anyways, you can't finish your cooking without using these parts, right? In that case, you don't need to worry about it and just do your best.」

Ai Fa showed no hesitation in her eyes.

In that case, I won't hesitate either.

This wasn't just my personal battle, but a fight that will affect the fate of the Fa house.

In order to not drag others into this decision we made ourselves and bring about tragedy, we had to give it our all.

Part 2

A few hours later——

We finished the cooking with plenty of time to spare.

Of the four stoves, kiba pots were boiling in two of them. Going by my naming conventions, they would be 『kiba soup』. The soup has been brought to a boil, and mountains of poitan had been piled onto the plates. We just needed to wait for the guests' arrival before grilling the meat.

「Sigh, Asuta... Is this really fine...?」

Vena Wu sat lazily with her back to the wall and one knee in her arms as she called out to me worriedly.

She plays an important role in my plans this time.

「The pre-wedding celebration feast is important... I don't have any confidence...」

「It's fine. There's no problem at this point in time.」

「In that case, I...」

「Please proceed as planned.」

Vena Wu hugged her knee tightly, and glared at me grudgingly.

Her knee deformed her large breasts, and I could see the twisted shape even though there was a layer of clothing covering it, a truly erotic view. If everyone knew what I was thinking right now, they would definitely question my character.

「Asuta, are you... using me as a sacrifice so they won't complain against you...?」

「What do you mean? I have no reason to do that to you.」

「Because... I'm a burden to you right...?」

The other ladies were resting outside the stove house to cool down.

That was why Vena Wu brought up this topic. I was a little frantic since the door was open.

「I-I don't think you are a burden. Didn't we talk about this before? My thinking remains the same. Vena Wu, I really hope you can abandon your strange thinking.」

「But... Even if I change my thinking, my feelings can't be changed...」

Her smooth cheeks blushed a little again.

「You think everything I did is a scheme...? I'm already a 20 year-old virgin, you think I can do that...?」

「Noo, what I mean is...」

「Really now... the heir to house Lutim who is visiting today proposed to my family before, and is one of the men I turned down...」

She covered her face with her knees this time.

「If I messed up during this man's pre wedding celebration... and the house head of house Lutim lash out at me... Ahh, I want to die...」

「I-I told you it will be fine! If you fail, I will take all the blame! It will all be my fault! But if it succeeds, then it will be your glory, alright?」

Vena Wu's eyes were cast my way from the shadows of her knees

「You might say that now, but you are planning to betray me in the end, correct...?」

「I won't betray you! I promise on this Santoku knife!」

After saying that, her brown eyes drooped a little, and there was a gleam of coquetry in them.

「How sly... How can I change my feelings now...? You are cold to me at times, and kind to me at other times. I feel like a puppet dancing to your tunes...」

Then what do you want me to do!?

At this moment, a cold voice came from behind me:

「What are you rambling about by yourself?」

It seems like I raised my voice unknowingly. I felt a chill down my back because of my carelessness.

Ai Fa stood at the entrance of the stove room, and alternated her sharp gaze between Vena Wu and me.

「The guests from house Lutim are here, it's time, right?」

When I heard that, I became tensed.

I nodded, turned to Vena Wu and said:

「Good! Let's begin! Vena Wu, please proceed as we planned!」

「Oh! So you are that outsider staying in the Fa house!」

When I carried the kiba meat soup out together with Mia Lei Wu, someone welcomed me with a loud voice.

He was an unfamiliar large man sitting at the seat of honor.

A tall and burly man, he was on par with Donda Wu seated besides him.

Aside from being tall, he was also broad and thick. He was wearing a vest similar to mine, but he was merely draping over his shoulders, and his beer belly protrude out wide.

By the way, he had a shiny bald head, thick brow and all his facial features were big. An orange beard grew from his wide chin. His brown skin matched his exotic dressing really well, and he totally looked the part of an Arabian demon god.

He might be smiling now, but if he ever gets mad, not just Vena Wu, even I would want to die.

I placed the iron pot onto the stove used to keep it warm, kneeled before him and said with a bow:



「I'm Asuta from the Fa house, I will be tending to the hearth together with the women from the Wu clan.」

「I see. I heard the dinner you will serve is different from the other houses, so this will be a joyous feast, no? Kiba meat will all be the same after putting them into our stomach, but this will definitely be an interesting topic! I'm looking forward to you, Asuta of house Fa!」

「I hope dinner will suit your taste.」

I replied in rather sloppy polite speech, then got up after saying 「I will take my leave.」

I was just an apprentice chef in a family restaurant after all, not the head chef of a french restaurant or the lady boss of a high class Japanese restaurant. My family only taught me to say 「welcome」 when greeting the customers.

Mia Lei Wu who brought in the kiba meat soup with me stayed behind to chat with the guests, and I returned to the entrance of the room.

I used this chance to observe the other guests.

To the left and right of the seat of honor were an unfamiliar couple.

That should be the heir of the Lutim house and his fiancée.

I remember the groom's name was Kaslan Lutim.

He seemed like a righteous man, and his body stature could rival the eldest son of the Wu clan, Jiza Wu... Or rather, Jiza Wu himself was seated beside him, and the two of them seated side by side could only be described as 「spectacular」.

The two fathers were too well built, and their heirs both had proportionate and toned bodies. They both had a quiet dignity about them, and their style and aura befitted their positions as the next house head.

Kaslan Lutim's appearance was deeply influenced by his father, and all his facial features were large. His face was squarish with a chiselled jaw, and couldn't be considered handsome.

However, his brown hair had been cut refreshingly short and tidy, and his deep blue eyes had a quiet shine. His figure looked competent and honest, and I guess that he would make a good husband.

On the other hand, I remember the name of the bride was Ema Min.

Amongst the kin house of the Wu clan, Min was behind Wu, Lutim and Lei, right in the middle. Grandma Ditto Min came from the Min house.

Which means, women would keep their family name behind their given name when they marry out of their house to show their birth origins.

After Ditto Min marry into the Wu clan, she became Ditto Min Wu. Seven days later, this lady would turn from Ema Min to Ema Min Lutim, and so on.

Ehh...

「Ai Fa- Tsurumi...」

A foolish delusion arose in my mind as I thought about this, a secret I would take with me to the grave.

If this day really comes, I would probably become 「Asuta- Fa」 instead. No matter what, delusioning about impossible things was a wasteful effort.

I looked at the bride Ema Min before me.

This girl wasn't fat or thin, of average height and looked healthy. She sat really straight and looked like a girl with good upbringing.

Her black hair was bundled up high, and her light blue eyes shone brightly. She looked pure and serious, and didn't seem intimidated at all as she waited quietly for the feast to begin.

She was about my age, but had such a mature air about her. Was this a calm demeanor all women about to be wed share in common? She made me and Leina Wu who was the same age look childish.

For a half-assed seventeen year old guy like me, I prefer pure and cheerful girls over those who looked more mature than their age suggest. If I had to be more specific, I like girls who would normally show a cold face, but has a straight personality, will kick other people's legs, and has eyes like a wild cat—— I know, that's not important.

No matter what, the young couple looked wonderful together!

And we were using their pre-wedding celebration feast to hold such a strange contest, which makes me feel bad.

And just like what his wife said, the subject who set up this match looked unhappy.

When I greeted the person beside him, Donda Wu averted his eyes and started taking large swigs of fruit wine.

Don't drink so much that you can't tell the taste of the dish. I prayed in my heart. When I continued walking forward, I felt a sticky gaze coming from the side.

—— It was the second son of the Wu clan, Darum Wu.

When we visited the Wu clan three days ago, he was the only one I didn't meet.

Which means, this was a reunion after two weeks. He had an aura as fierce as a wolf, has a well toned body and inherited his father's eyes.

If not for his fierce eyes and expression, he would probably be the most handsome man in the Wu clan. Because of what happened between Ai Fa and him, I couldn't open my heart to this young man.

Hence, I glared back at him with a bit of force—— When I did that, he averted his eyes a little unnaturally.

Why did that happen? His stubborn profile looked dismayed and disgusted.

To his side was the youngest brother leaning his cheek onto his palm, and the third sister who got tired of waiting and turned her head to one side. The energetic youngest sister between them waved at me. I nodded at her and headed for the exit.

At this moment, Ai Fa, Leina Wu and Vena Wu brought in the other pot and a plate filled with poitan.

「Ohhh!? What's that? Is that really food!?」

When Dan Lutim's surprised voice came from behind, I was already on my way to the stove room.

The sky had already turned dark, but there were several candle stands along the path to the back of the building, providing safe passage.

When I finally returned to the stove room, I waited for the women to return with the nervousness of an imminent battle.

「Sorry, I couldn't help chatting with them. Everyone was pleasantly surprised by that poitan.」

Everyone came back with the energetic mother of the Wu clan.

And so, the curtains were drawn for the opening battle——

「They will probably have plenty of comments. I will serve the plate to the seat of honor then.」

After saying that, I reached for the plate containing the main dish, but Mia Lei Wu stopped me.

「Hey, is that really fine? The clan head already look unhappy, I'm worried.」

Her face that was always lively and cheerful had an intimidatingly serious expression right now.

This was the dignity of a mother of seven in charge of all matters of chores within the house.

If my mother was still alive, the two of them would be about the same age. As I was thinking about that, I said:

「If I don't speak up to defend myself, I will lose all ties to the Wu clan, and I don't want that. This might be brusque, but I have decided to pick a quarrel with the clan head.」

Mia Lei Wu's expression changed from surprise and dumbfoundedness—— to a smile.

「I get it! I can't antagonize my own husband, but I will cheer for you and protect you from being murdered. Go quarrel with him as much as you want!」

She smacked my back loudly.

It hurts a lot, but it made me hyped up.

「I'm going then.」

Picking up the plate with both hands, I walked out of the stove room.

Ai Fa who was holding a similar plate chased after me.

「Wait, don't go alone. If that bunch of burly men suddenly started raging, what will you do? You can't protect yourself, so don't act by yourself.」

「I'm going to quarrel with them, but not brawl with them.」

「If they suddenly hit you, do you think you can escape unscathed?」

「... I will probably die.」

「In that case...」 Ai Fa leaned in closed and said: 「don't leave my side.」

If a next life exist, playing the role of a princess wouldn't be bad at all. Ai Fa's face looked brave and reliable, just like a prince. That made me think up such a delusion.

Or rather, this is my next life right now.

This second life wasn't bad either.

Such a thought actually welled up within me, making me feel that I was really blissed.

「Sorry for the wait, this is the last dish.」

I stepped into the hall alongside Ai Fa.,

Donda Wu and Dan Lutim sat at the seat of honor.

To their right were Kaslan Lutim, Jiza Wu, Darum Wu and Ludo Wu. Followed by Lala Wu and Rimee Wu.

To their left were Ema Min, Ditto Min Wu, Sati Lei Wu. Three empty seats for those tending to the hearth followed. Kota Wu laid in the cradle behind Sati Lei Wu and made loud baby noises.

Aside from this baby, eleven pairs of eyes welcomed us. Some were sparkling from expectation, a few looked displeased, and the others appeared unmoved.

Ai Fa and I headed to the seat of honor while basking in their gaze.

I presented the plate to the two house heads, and Ai Fa served her plate to the two heirs.

The instant they laid eyes on the contents of the plate——

Donda Wu's eyes burned intensely, and Dan Lutim lashed out loudly:

「The heck is this!？」

Part 3

「This is grilled kiba meat.」

Fortunately, he didn't punched me.

He just glared at me with fiery eyes, and roared angrily.

The other three ladies also followed us into the silent room, and started serving the seats to the right. Even though everyone kept their voices down, mumbling voices were starting to become audible.

Ema Min whom I was meeting for the first time stared with her eyes wide and said 「Ara.」

Kaslan Lutim remained politely expressionless.

I didn't serve any strange dish. Even so, it caused a huge uproar—— probably due to a certain ingredient. It was clear from a glance that I used 「meat from the torso」.

Intense flames burned in Donda Wu's eyes.

Thick veins appeared on the bald head of Dan Lutim, and his thick lips were trembling slightly.

「Donda Wu! What's going on! Explain this to me!」

His mouth wide as he roared for a second time.

He then quietly turned to us and said:

「This—— This kiba meat—— is from the kiba's torso!」

As expected, the Lutim house only eat the thigh meat too.

This development was just like what Mia Lei Wu predicted.

「... It appears so.」

Donda Wu answered with a deep voice.

His emotion had transcended rage, and his agitation was clear from his sombre voice. Just hearing his voice was enough to make my liver shrink from fear.

「It appears so? What do you mean!? This is a pre-celebration of the eldest son of house Lutim! What are you trying to do, serving me monta feed! The kinship between the Wu clan and house Lutim is stronger than the other kin houses...!」

「I know nothing about this.」

Just the aura behind these words was enough for Dan Lutim to swallow back his accusations.

As if he was looking at something unbelievable, he stared at Donda Wu with his large round eyes.

「Know nothing... What do you mean, Donda Wu?」

「For the Wu clan, this is a joyous feast of the utmost importance. I merely ordered that brat to tend the hearth for this feast. I know nothing about anything that happens after.」

When he heard Donda Wu say that, Dan Lutim turned to me hard.

His movement was so intense that his cheeks wobbled for a bit.

「Hearth tender! The head of the Wu clan ordered you to tend to the hearth—— despite knowing that this is a pre-celebration for the Lutim house, you still served us monta feed!?」

「This isn't monta feed. This is 『kiba steak』. I prepared meat from three body parts for everyone, which are the spare ribs, the shoulders and the thigh.」

As I was explaining, Mia Lei Wu and Vena Wu headed to the stove room to take the other plates. Leina Wu disappeared down the deep passage of the hall to bring Jiba Wu.

And——

There were large plates placed before everyone, and the dish in the plate were still steaming hot.

As I announced, this was 『kiba steak』.

Since they placed so much emphasis on the bite, I needed a dish that was full of that—— and I came up with this dish to fill that role.

And of course, this wasn't the only reason why I chose this dish. However, speaking of the most common meat dish, spare ribs naturally comes to mind.

As this was spare ribs, I didn't use any special cooking methods, and just carefully grilled them.

Like the name implies, thigh meat came from the kiba's leg.

shoulders were the back and shoulders of the kiba.

And the spare ribs—— were the rib bone and the meat around it.

There were large rib bones with plenty of meat on everyone's plates.

And so, it was impossible for anyone to mistake that for thigh meat.

「This—— monta feed——」 Dan Lutim's lips started trembling again.

For a non Forest's Edge denizen like me, the spare ribs look delicious.

The visual impact of the shoulders and thigh steaks were not far behind the ribs. They were about 2.5cm thick, a rather sumptuous serving.

Handling steaks of such thickness required an equivalent amount of effort.

Starting from the ingredient preparation, there were tendons in many parts, and I needed to cut them open before hand. The ratio of lean meat in the thigh was higher, so I was worried that it would be too tough after grilling. Thus, I knocked the thigh meat with a clean bottle to destroy its fabric.

Next, I sprinkled salt and pico leaves on one side of the steak, and after letting it sit for 10 minutes, the prep work was done.

After this, I toss some fats onto a preheated iron pot, and after rolling it over the pot's surface, I placed the side with the garnishing facing down into the pot.

When the gridded surface turned golden brown, I shift the steak onto a pot with weak flame.

Depending on the intensity of the fire, red meat juice would surface after a minute or two, which was the cue to flip it over.

Up til now, these were the steps to prepare a beef steak set meal (800 yen) in 『Tsurumi restaurant』 back home. However, the dish I was preparing was kiba, not beef. I was a bit worried that the center wasn't completely cooked. Ai Fa also said that 「half cooked meat is worthless」.

Normally, I will continue to grill the beef steak with weak fire until it was done. But now, I had to put the steak back into the pot with strong fire.

Since I didn't just want to grill it to medium rare or medium, using a weak fire would take too much time. Well done steak wasn't juicy in the first place, so the juices would be lost if I grill it for too long.

Therefore, I cooked the other side with strong flame too, and added in fruit wine at this point to cook it with steam. The heat would penetrate the entire steak, so I chose to use the same method I used for handling hamburg steak.

When the alcohol evaporates completely, I open the pot. When the other side turns golden brown, I would place the steak back to the pot with weak fire.

When clear colored juice comes out from the grilled surface, the dish was done.

—— So the cooking method was decided.

After that was repeated experiments to find the thickness which this method worked best on.

If the meat was too thick, it would take a long time to cook the center of the steak. The juice would be lost slowly, and the meat would become dry.

But if it was too thin, then the dish would be no different from the grill meat usually served in the Wu clan.

The results of the experiments showed that thickness to be 2.5cm.

It was rather thick for a steak.

As the steak were completely cooked, it should be tough to bite, which wasn't a problem for the denizens of Forest's Edge who always chew on jerky. Ai Fa confirmed that for me.

It was a kiba steak that challenged the limits of its thickness.

I had decided to decide the match with Donda Wu with this dish —— but before that, I needed to deal with the Lutim house head who was even more brusque than Donda Wu.

「... Only the monta who eats rotten meat would feast on a kiba's torso!」

Dan Lutim roared again.

「Aside from monta, only weak households who couldn't hunt the kiba properly would eat this meat!」

Dan Lutim yelled as he shifted his gaze to Ai Fa and said:

「Ai Fa of house Fa! I see many things hanging from your neck, are those tusks and horns just decorations!? Even though you hunted plenty of kiba, you still need to deprive the monta of their feed!？」

A rather scary expression appeared on Dan Lutim's round face.

If he had a sabre at his waist, his fingers would definitely be on the handle.

「No, that is impossible. Which means, you are mocking my house? You think monta feed befits the Lutim house...?」

「Lutim house members are fellow denizens of Forest's Edge, Asuta and I have no intention of mocking anyone. Head of house Lutim, can you please calm down?」

Ai Fa's voice was very calm in contrast.

Her blue eyes were colder than usual.

「I have a question for you, head of house Lutim. Do you think eating the torso of a kiba is an act of weakness? Is that why you are so agitated about parts from the torso being used for dinner?」

「Isn't that obvious? If we hunters do our job well, just eating thigh meat would suffice for us! A hunter that needs to eat the torso of a kiba to survive is proof of a weak hunter!」

「As I expected.」

While Dan Lutim's voice got more and more agitated, Ai Fa's voice became calmer.

Not just calm, she was ice cold like a steel blade.

「In that case, the way the Wu clan and the Lutim house does things differs from the Fa house. This is ill consideration on our part, and I apologize... The Wu clan and Lutim house are resourceful and powerful, the Fa house can't even begin to compare.」

In the face of the raging Dan Lutim, Ai Fa stared at his scary face and continued:

「For example—— when I was little, there was a time when my father Gill hurt his leg and couldn't hunt. The tusks and horns we had decreased quickly, and we could only eat jerky towards the end. At this time, a young kiba fell into a sub standard trap set by me, so my Mother Mei and I carried that small kiba back home.」

It was rare for Ai Fa to talk about her parents.

As I listened with bated breath, Ai Fa besides me continued to speak with a quiet and strong voice.

「Back then, my mother didn't only cook the thigh meat, she also cut off the meat from its back and grilled it for us. When you mentioned 『depriving a monta of its feed to survive』, this was how desperate such a lifestyle was.」

「... That's right. Some of those famished people will even eat the kiba's torso and head, the denizens of Forest's Edge can't permit such acts of weakness!」

「I can understand. When our family fell into such a desperate state, it was true that he was a weak hunter then. Within that period of time, my father Gill wasn't even qualified to be called a hunter. I knew how anguish my father felt, after all, weakness itself is a sin for the hunters of Forest's Edge.」

Ai Fa left these words.

And then —— she did something I never expected.

I thought she would become agitated like Dan Lutim, but the corners of her lips rose and she smiled instead.

「Head of the Lutim house, your kins disposed the torso of the kiba into the forest because they are worthless to you. You have already done your part as a hunter dutifully, so there is no shame even if you consume these meat. These meat are delicious, and suitable for such a joyous occasion. That's why we are serving them to everyone here.」

「You are saying these meat are delicious and suitable for joyous occasions——?」

Before this burly bald headed man started shouting, his son calmly said:

「Father Dan Lutim, no matter what we are served, the food reflects the hospitality of the Wu clan, demeaning them goes against the law of Forest's Edge. Be it monta feed of rat intestines, the hearth tender will taste the same dish, and we have to feast on the forest's grace.」

「But Kaslan...」

「If you think the fault lies with the other party, please raise it against them after having a taste.」

His voice was calm from the beginning to the end, but he kept his head lowered as if he was concealing the emotions in his blue eyes.

Speaking of which, when I tended to the Wu clan's hearth earlier, Donda Wu didn't complain before finishing his dinner. He only started making noise after finishing his food, saying that was monta feed and poison that would corrode his soul.

Someone once told me that tending to the hearth was to tend to life for that night.

Hence, since I was the one tending to the hearth, no one could complain no matter what food I served.

However, if the food being served ever tarnish the life and soul of the diners—— it meant the hearth tender had betrayed the trust of everyone, and need to be persecuted.

If someone tarnish the soul of his fiancée, what would this righteous youth do? Just thinking about this stresses my heart out.

「Thank you for waiting...」 At this moment, a raspy voice of an old lady could be heard.

Just like that night, Grandma Jiba entered the hall while accompanied by Leina Wu.

Although his face was still as red as a cooked octopus, Dan Lutim still grabbed his left shoulder with his right hand like his son and bowed. Ema Min did the same, but with her left hand on her right shoulder.

「Well then, the banquet will begin now. Everyone return to your seats.」

Donda Wu announced with an angry and serious voice.

Part 4

「... We offer thanks for the forest's grace...」

Donda Wu's voice rang out once again.

This might be a banquet, but there's no special speech and everyone started eating as usual.

「... We offer thanks to Mia Lei, Vena, Leina, Ai Fa, Asuta for tending the fire in the hearth, so our lives can be extended tonight...」

Everyone recited the same thing, but Dan Lutim and the others were on the verge of exploding with rage. We wouldn't be able to calm his anger no matter what we said.

In order to let him learn the value of this meat, we could only do so by eating it.

The menu today were 『kiba steak』, 『kiba soup』 and 『grilled poitan』.

There were three types of steaks; thigh, spare ribs and shoulders.

We reduced the quantity of meat in the kiba soup, and including aria, we added three types of vegetables.

Replicating the plate lay out for these few nights, we placed all the poitan onto three big plates and piled it up high. Instead of okonomiyaki, it looked closer to pale colored hot cakes. Each piece was made from two poitan, equivalent to one day's worth of nutrition. The men could eat two to four pieces in one go.

Let's dig in——

I was concerned about the reaction of the others, but I had to taste it for myself first.

I reached for the spare rib.

I picked up the fork I borrowed from the Wu clan meant for grilling meat to stab into the meat, held the bony part with my other hand, and bit into the meat that was still warm.

As it was well done, there wasn't much juice in them.

The fats were almost all gone.

However, the ribs were where the fats was, so it remained juicy even after grilling it for so long. If I had to compare it to pork, this was the three layer meat we were all familiar with. As it wasn't sliced thinly, it had a heavy taste.

The meat was slightly tough while the fats were soft. When I put it in my mouth, the texture felt just right and the bite it had felt great. I love pork ribs and Okinawa pork, so this was a wonderful taste.

I felt that the spare ribs were cooked really well.

I tried a bite of the poitan to rest my taste buds, then attack the next dish—— the shoulder roast.

It was filled with fats too.

However, it was a thick slab of meat unlike the ribs, so it had more bite to it.

And it was 2.5cm thick.

After putting it in my mouth and chewing it, the thick fresh taste spreads in my mouth.

Despite losing so much juice during the roasting, this type of meat had plenty of fats and wouldn't dry up.

Meat! This was meat... That was the feeling it gave.

If my stomach wasn't strong enough, the sight of it would probably turn me away.

But I still felt this meat was delicious —— my jaw was getting tired though.

Next, I enjoyed the kiba soup Mia Lei Wu served for me with satisfaction.

The two ingredients she picked for me, tino leaves and pula, were added into this soup.

I already taste tested it. Tino leaves were like roses made from lettuce. It had a faint taste of grass, but it was barely noticeable, and mainly added for the texture it had.

As for the texture, instead of lettuce, it was closer to cabbages. It turned soft and mushy after cooking, but it would absorb the soup and its wonderful taste. The taste was as good as aria which resembles onions.

On the other hand, pula had a rich bitter taste.

Its appearance was like thick ginkgo, about its size and had a dark green hue.

I didn't think it taste good, but after trying it in a dish, its bitterness that other ingredients didn't have made it an effective garnishing.

It didn't soften even after cooking it. We already sliced it thinly, but it was still firm and chewy.

If I had to compare its unique taste with ingredients I knew, that would be green pepper.

No matter what, it enhanced the taste of the kiba soup.

As several vegetables had been added, the soup had a deep taste about it.

But if vegetables that didn't mesh well were added to this kiba soup, it would definitely destroy its taste.

Even in this different world that wasn't too concerned with 「eating」, mothers were still strong. The soup was this successfully thanks to Mia Lei Wu's effort.

And so—— I tasted most of the dishes.

Only the 「thigh steak」 was left.

For me, this was a difficult enemy to take down.

But I still needed to try it first.

As I mustered my courage and was about to bite down——

At that instant—— a voice pierced the room.

「What... What is this!?!」

It was a voice that had completely lost its reason.

The one who shouted was Dan Lutim.

He remained still with his hands on the spare ribs.

His large mouth was stained with oil.

「Hey! You! What meat is this!?!」

He stared with wide open eyes at me who was seated at the lower seats.

Ara, I thought they would only comment after the meal? Even though that was what I thought, I still answered: 「I already said, this is kiba rib.」

I then asked a little deviously: 「What about this meat?」

「Ughh...」 His oil stained lips started to tremble.

「... Delicious!」

He said with a volume bordering on a roar and took a large bite of meat.

He was so aggressive that he looked as if he want to chew the bones too.

「Delicious! This meat is delicious! But why? Why is the ribs of a kiba... Even though this is monta feed!?!」

「This isn't monta feed. There is an animal similar to kiba in my country, and we will cook every parts of its body.」

「B-But, the torso of the kiba should have such a strong stench and is unpalatable...!」

「That's because you don't know the proper way to slaughter them yet... Or rather, you don't need to learn the way to slaughter kibas. For the denizens of Forest's Edge, kiba aren't hunted for the sake of eating them in the first place.」

I never imagined that I would need to explain this during the meal. Never mind, my jaw was getting tired so this suited me just fine.

「I heard that kibas are a scary and harmful beast. Even if 50 kibas were hunted every day, their numbers wouldn't fall. In order to protect the farmland of the western kingdom, the denizens of Forest's Edge had to risk their lives to keep on hunting kibas—— hence, there would be left over meat no matter how much was consumed. That's why the denizens of Forest's Edge think slaughtering kiba is a hassle, and will leave behind the torso that had a strong stench and think of them as monta feed. This habit probably formed naturally... However, all the parts of a kiba are delicious, that's why I prepared these dishes in the hope that everyone can understand this.」

Dan Lutim was like a sleepwalker, listening to me with a blank expression as he took large bites of meat.

Donda Wu beside him didn't seem to be listening as he chew on the steak quietly.

Everyone had different reactions.

Rimee Wu stared at me as she took small bites to satiate her hunger; Jiza Wu was probably alternating his gaze between me and the clan head, but I couldn't be sure as his eyes were too narrow.

Leina Wu who was accompanying Grandma Jiba stared at me warmly, while the housewives ignored the shocked Dan Lutim and enjoyed their meal harmoniously.

Worth mentioning were the reactions of Kaslan Lutim and Ema Min.

As they ate quietly, their eyes would meet from time to time and smile at each other. This atmosphere brings to my mind the thought that 「Ara, it's great that the two of you looks so blissful.」

And finally, Ai Fa——

Ai Fa bit on her meat as she carefully observed Donda Wu.

「... head of the Lutim house, Dan Lutim, have you tried the thigh steak?」

Giving a monologue by myself in a silent hall makes me feel like a retard, so I tried throwing out a topic.

「I'm eating it right now, the thigh steak is delicious too.」 the Lutim house head said and nodded.

His smooth head and beer belly made him feel like a giant baby, I thought quietly in my heart.

「The thigh steak don't have any stench because of the same reasoning. Most of the stench can be removed by bloodletting. So a delicious meal can be prepared even with just thigh meat alone. However, my main goal is to let everyone know that the other parts of the kiba is tasty too.」

「Delicious! This is really delicious! I like this meat sticking to the bone! But the thigh meat is tasty too!」

His attitude and demeanor were completely different.

I felt a little embarrassed because of how forthright he was.

「If a house don't have enough men, they wouldn't be able to carry the huge kiba home, so they can only bring home the thigh. If the entire kiba is brought back to skin their hide like what the Wu clan does, but only the thigh meat is eaten and the rest treated as monta feed, I think that is a waste.」

「My house brings the entire kiba back too! I—— I actually left something so delicious to the monta...!」

He was too forthright and made it hard for me to keep up the conversation.

「And so, if everyone bloodleets the kiba when you hunt them, and slaughter them in the appropriate fashion after skinning the hide, everyone can taste this delicious meat. It's not difficult, even a brat like me can do it. Anyone who put their mind to it can...」

「Why must we go through such a hassle?」

Someone interjected——

Donda Wu had finally spoken.

He actually finished all the meat in such a short amount of time.

I only took a few bites of the ribs and shoulders.

「Our goal is to hunt the life of the kiba, there is no need to spend that much effort. Hunters don't need to do such unnecessary things to survive.」

His voice was rather composed.

The fact that this man could speak so calmly surprised me——

On a second look, everyone including the members of the Wu clan all had an expression of shock.

Rimee Wu and Ludo Wu were still chewing their food passionately, but everyone else had stopped.

That was how abnormal his actions were.

Which meant——

This was the crucial moment.

「... If it is only for survival, that is true.」

I could feel the sweat on my back.

This time, just increasing the flavor of the dishes would not be enough.

I needed to use 「words」 to make this man acknowledge my cooking, and feel satisfaction.

To be honest, this was too heavy a burden for a mere apprentice chef.

But I had to finish it.

This was for the sake of Ai Fa beside me. Her eyes were burning quietly.

「If we only eat and sleep, we will be no different from animals—— I won't describe everyone this way. After all, the denizens of Forest's Edge don't just eat and sleep. Everyone work hard and help each other in order to survive, and find happiness in our daily life. This lifestyle might be very different from life in my country of birth, but the foundations are the same... That's what I feel.」

「Hmmp, what are you rambling on about, brat? You sweet talked my family with that nimble tongue of yours, and now you are trying to fool me?」

「My tongue isn't nimble at all. To be honest, I have ran out of things to say. And I have no intention of fooling your family.」

I swept my gaze across everyone in the hall.

The twelve members of the Wu clan.

Two members of the Lutim house, and a daughter from the Min house.

And Ai Fa.

Except for Ai Fa, everyone else showed expression of doubts, and wasn't sure what I was trying to do.

I was picking a quarrel.

And then I'll apologize to him after coming to a mutual understanding.

That was my current thoughts.

「I wasn't fooling your family. I'm just hoping they can feel happy after tasting delicious food. When I first started doing this, my intention was to encourage Jiba Wu to eat. However, Rimee Wu complimented my cooking, so I wanted the entire Wu clan to enjoy a tasty meal—— such an arrogant attitude appeared in my mind.」

「.....」

「In the end, I received blessings from many people which made me rather happy. However... I felt frustrated at the people who didn't praise my cooking. Especially Donda Wu, you disparaged my cooking so I detested you the most. I asked you to let me tend to the hearth once more because I wanted a rematch.」

「I know what you want to say, so you don't need to keep nagging about it.」

「No, even so, please bear with my nagging. What I'm about to say is really typical, but I can finally say my sincere thoughts.」

After saying that, I changed my posture from sitting crossed legged to kneeling, and bowed deeply like I did three days ago and said:

「An immature chef like me actually made the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu consume poison that corrodes the soul of the hunter. I wish to apologize for this once more.」

Part 5

「... What tricks are you trying to pull?」 Donda Wu's deep voice echoed in the hall.

「This is no trick. I said the same thing three days ago, but I will say it again today more sincerely.」

I lifted my head while maintaining my kneeling position, and faced Donda Wu:

「For hunters, my cooking will really become poison. The eldest son of the Wu clan Jiza Wu told me this.」

Jiza Wu turned his head towards me in surprise.

It seemed that I wasn't just a minor character since I managed to make this man panic.

「Like Jiza Wu said, the cooking I served that night is 『poison』 for hunters... That is too much of an exaggeration, isn't it, I should describe it as 『might become poison』 to be more accurate.」

「Asuta, hold on. What are you talking about? What did I say to you?」

「Don't you remember? If you eat this tender meat every day, you feel that your teeth will lose their strength and slowly fall off. You are probably right.」

「What!? I will become toothless like Grandma Jiba?」

Rimee Wu held her plate with both hands and remained stiff. I smiled gently at her and said:

「No, if it was just once or twice, it will not have much effect. Even if it was a hundred or two hundred times, it will be fine. Even a thousand or two times should be okay.」

「Huh! Then there's no problem! That's great...」

Rimee Wu sighed in relief rather forthrightly.



Be it a man in his prime or a seven, eight years old girl, everyone had actions that befits their age.

By the way, that bald old man who had regressed to a toddler was biting on the meat and nodded in agreement... For someone who didn't know about 『hamburg steak』, this should be a topic that had nothing to do with them.

Anyways, I continued speaking with Rimee Wu:

「Hmm, there's no need to worry... But Rimee Wu, did you remember what you said three days ago? You said you don't want to eat anything else but hamburg steak for every meal, right?」

「Yes! Because hamburg steak is tasty!」

I stole a glance at Donda Wu.

The head of the Wu clan was still glaring at me with a fire raging in his eyes.

... That old man who kept nodding his head besides Donda Wu was really irritating.

「Rimee Wu, that's not good. If you eat hamburg steak all day, your teeth might become weak. Even if your teeth are fine, you might give birth to a child with weak teeth. If that child continue eating hamburg steak all day, her child might possess even weaker teeth... That was how the teeth and jaw strength of the citizens of my country got weaker and weaker.」

I weaved in some lies into my vague memories.

I continued sincerely:

「Allow me to confess. For me, the meat dish is a failure... It is hard for me to eat.」

Everyone stared with their eyes wide.

—— Except for the men from the Wu clan, minus Ludo Wu.

「Because the meat is too tough. I can't bite into it. I think the ribs are great, and I can still eat the roast shoulders that is filled with fats, but the thigh steak is too tough for me. If the thickness is reduced by half, it will be just right for me.」

「You're lying! The thigh steak is chewy, but not that tough! I love this meat the most!」

「In that case, can you eat my share, Rimee? I haven't touch it yet... I really can't eat it.」

I returned my gaze back to Donda Wu, and found him still expressionless and silent.

This was the first crucial moment.

「That's how weak my family is, so there is no way that I can become a hunter. For example, some of the people in my country took on jobs that are physically demanding erm—— it's a sort of

simulated battle. They don't use swords or shields, but compete with bats and balls. These group of men earn a living by winning in this competition.」

Even if it was just vague words, I still hope to convey my thoughts to them properly.

What I just described was 「professional baseball players」.

「When they wield their bats and throw the balls, the men will use all their strength. When they do so, I heard that they will grit their teeth so hard that it chips or loosens. And so, they will put adequately strong fillings in their mouth and bite down on it in place of their teeth.」

What I was describing was a mouth guard.

I actually wasn't sure what the actual fact was. But I often hear my dad talking about such tidbits of knowledge as he pretended to be an expert.

Therefore, teeth was important. Not just baseball players, boxers too—— the topic expanded even more.

And so, I expounded on the topic:

「—— There is another competition that is more direct, where two competitors hit at each other with their fist. To protect their teeth, they will also put strong fillings into their mouth. This is not related to what I am saying, but I heard the punching power is very much different if they bite down on this filling. They can exert more strength than normal when they can bite down as hard as they can.」

Everyone continued their meal a little hesitantly as they listened to me with a troubled face.

Donda Wu was still expressionless.

「And so, 『bite』 and 『exerting one's full strength』 is closely related. Actually, the nutritional values of food will also affect the hardness of teeth, so it might not be adequate to describe this as 『teeth weakening』. However, if you keep eating soft food, then the roots of your teeth, biting power and jaw strength will become weaker. That's why I have been thinking about what Donda Wu and Jiza Wu said—— that this is poison that corrodes the hunter's soul. That eating this will cause your teeth to lose their strength and fall out. I have been thinking about the meaning behind these words.」

「.....」

「And of course, Donda Wu and the others didn't think this deep when they said that. Lala also mentioned that she hates soft meat, so this might just be personal preference. However —— if Donda Wu accepted my cooking and lavished it with praise, what will happen? Such thoughts surfaced in my mind.」

What I was about to say wasn't the vague memories from my mind or lies.

It was my sincere thoughts.

My confession without any shred of lies.

I should have thought about this half a month ago before preparing the meal for the Wu clan.

「I used a technique that didn't exist in Forest's Edge in my cooking. Thanks to that, most people complimented my dishes. But if everyone accepts my cooking unconditionally—— Maybe they will really eat hamburg steak all day. Just the thought of this gave me the chills.」

This thought has been on my mind for quite some time now.

Because of Ai Fa's obsession with hamburg steak.

While it made me overjoyed, it also filled me with unease.

Aside from the hamburg steak, she would still chew on the tough jerky, so her jaw wouldn't degrade so quickly.

Even so, obsessing over hamburg steak still wasn't a good thing.

If the change of diet deprives Ai Fa of her life force—— I would want to hang myself. This also applied to the members of the Wu clan.

Fate brought me who was from another world into contact with the Wu clan, so I felt a strong urge to convey these thoughts to them.

Under such circumstances, I witnessed that scene three days ago——

In order to hunt kibas, the men headed into the forest with drive and determination —— when I saw how much wild energy filled their bodies, I was certain of one thing.

—— For the people of this world, my cooking might be a poison.

「My next example is something that happened in my home nation: if you gift wine to a tribe that has no idea what wine is, over time, more than half of the tribesmen will become alcoholic. I heard something so horrific had happened before. I'm not sure if my cooking is that powerful, but I still felt terrified. Because my food has the chance of being a negative influence to others.」

Did I convey my thoughts to everyone?

Rambling on like this wasn't like me, so it was time to head for the climax——

「That's why I wish to share my knowledge to everyone here. Eating soft meat all the time will risk weakening the teeth and jaw power. The torso of a kiba isn't monta feed, and can be turned into a delicious meal with some effort. I hope everyone can keep this two points in mind and understand the joy of enjoying tasty food.」

On a closer look, Ai Fa had finished her meal before I realized it. She didn't look Donda Wu's way, but was staring at me.

I felt that her eyes were filled with a gentle light.

「Well then, it's about time for me to reveal the secret. Actually, the only dish made by me today is the hamburg steak Jiba Wu is eating right now.」

「What!」 Dan Lutim shouted.

Aside from a select few, everyone started chattering.

「The poitan is made by Leina Wu, Mia Lei Wu prepared the soup, and the meat is grilled by Vena. I only instructed them the cooking method. Some of the meat got burnt, but it's fine since I brought extra meat with me. I think this meal has been cooked perfectly.」

Everyone shifted their gazes around, many of them lingering on Vena Wu.

These were all looks of praise, but Vena Wu concealed her face with her long fringe, and I felt she was glaring at me right now.

「This dish only requires grilling steak and is really simple. But I spent a lot of time to figure out the ideal heat and steak thickness. After finding the answer, I can share it with everyone, and it won't take as much effort as making hamburg steak. You won't need to sacrifice the time for other work to serve this meal.」

I felt a warm gaze coming from somewhere.

But things like gazes were intangible in the first place. So I dismiss it as me thinking too much, but ——

I felt that Grandma Jiba Wu who was seated beside Donda Wu seemed to be staring at me.

I ended my speech to Grandma Jiba, Donda Wu and everyone else present.

「This time, I tried thinking up a menu that is suitable for the hunter's tribe—— the denizens of Forest's Edge. Even without me, this delicious meal can be cooked if the entire family work together. I hope this will deepen the bonds between the Wu clan. That way, an outsider like me will also be a medicine to Forest's Edge, and not poison—— With this thought in mind, I worked hard for ten days, trying out the methods to grill delicious meat.」

I put my knees together and said with a bow:

「As a chef, it's really ridiculous that I can't confirm the taste of my own cooking. In a sense, this result is a failure. However, I think these dishes are suitable for a family to enjoy together, so it's a rather successful family meal, and I'm proud of that. I hope this dish can be a medicine for

everyone—— My apologies for rambling on so much during such an important banquet. Please enjoy your meal.」

Final Chapter

I spent another night in an empty house located within the Wu clan village.

The three guests from the Lutim house would be heading to the house of Donda Wu's nephew whom they were closed with to retire for the night.

However, there was still a party going on in the Wu main house.

After dinner, the Wu family members except for unwed women drank and make merry with the three guests.

After Ai Fa and I cleaned up the aftermath of dinner, we went together with Rimee Wu to Grandma Jiba's room to chat, then finally returned here to rest.

I sprawled out on the floor right after entering the room and made an 「Uwah~!」 sound.

「Not only was the meat tough, I also made such a long speech, it made my mouth really tired! I can't speak another word tonight!」

「.....」

「If that is so, stop talking to yourself so loudly..... aren't you going to retort like this?」

I turned back to look at Ai Fa. My mistress was sitting crossed legged by the wall with one knee up, and her expression was solemn.

「What's the matter? In the end, Donda Wu didn't give his comment, does that worry you?」

「.....」

「It will be fine! If he didn't acknowledge my cooking, he would have told us on the spot. And the guests from house Lutim looks satisfied, so there is no way the Wu clan can convince all their kin house to break ties with the Fa house.」

「... I'm not thinking about that.」

When we were at the banquet and Grandma Jiba's room, her eyes looked so calm. But she was too quiet now, and looked glumly.

I really hate seeing her like this.

「What's the matter? What are you thinking? Don't dwell over it alone, you can tell me anything.」

I crawled towards her after saying that.

If it was the usual Ai Fa, she would angrily retort 「don't act so disgustingly!」, but she didn't react at all.

I felt like a retard.

But that wasn't wrong either.

「Asuta, you——」

「Hmm?」

「Are you planning to leave Forest's Edge?」

Ai Fa said suddenly.

I was seriously surprised.

「What are you saying all of a sudden? I don't get it at all.」

「The things you said at the banquet is like a farewell speech to everyone. You wish to leave behind medicine, not poison before you are gone—— to me, that's what you are saying.」

The candle lighted up half of Ai Fa's face as she slowly looked my way.

「Am I right?」

「Not really... But, something like that.」

It was unsightly to talk while lying down, so I sat crossed legged like Ai Fa too.

「Like I told you quite some time ago, my feelings remain the same. I don't know why I have been thrown into this world, but since there are humans here too, I hope to keep a cordial relation with everyone. Instead of being harmful, I hope I can help everyone instead, and I was just explaining how I really felt.」

「.....」

「But like I said before, since I got thrown into this world out of nowhere, I might get thrown back one day too. If I go back, I might get squashed by the house or burned by the fire. Therefore, I want to live without regrets since that might happen one day... I don't really know myself, but I probably showed such an emotion, right?」

「... Do you think about this all the time?」

「No no, that's impossible! I will get a mental breakdown! But this isn't something I can just forget, so I will show these feelings occasionally.」

Ai Fa looked at me a little gloomily, then said with her head tilted slightly:

「... I have never thought about it.」

「Hmm?」

「I have never thought about you disappearing suddenly one day.」

Ai Fa said quietly.

Her reaction wasn't cold—— she said it calmly.

「... Because you don't think I'm from another world in the first place, right? It must be hard for you to imagine someone can disappear and appear just like that. Or rather, even I find it hard to imagine.」

「.....」

「But, I won't leave if such a ridiculous supernatural phenomenon don't force me to! I'm afraid of being abandoned by you instead... That's why, if I ever disappear without a trace, it must be the work of gods or demons, so don't forget to wish me Rest in Peace when the time comes.」

Ai Fa opened her mouth, when she made the shape of saying 「I」 ——

But I didn't hear what she said next.

Because the door was knocked.

Cock, cock, two knocks.

Ai Fa stood up slowly and stopped before the door.

「Who is it?」

「... Head of the Wu clan Donda Wu.」

He came.

The demon king himself.

I considered the possibility that he will come personally, but was still surprised when he really did.

Ai Fa removed the door bar silently, and opened the door.

A large shadow slipped into the room like a huge predator.

After saying 「sorry to intrude」, he started taking off his shoes.

I checked for a sabre on his waist.

He wasn't armed, and had a bottle of fruit wine in his left hand instead.

Donda Wu wished to have a cordial meeting—— I probably could interpret it this way.

His huge and heavy body walked towards me, and he sat down near the candle stand by the window.

Donda Wu's large eyes surveyed the room boredly.

「You two don't drink, so what are you doing in the middle of the night?」

「We are about to turn in.」

「Hmmp.」

He bit open the cork and took a swig of fruit wine.

He just finished a drinking session and he started another one. He was good with alcohol.

As his face looked fierce all the time, I couldn't discern his feelings, but he didn't seem to be showing intense emotions.

His pair of beast-like eyes were lively and guarded, his gaze was probably always this strong.

He looked more composed than usual.

But we were too close.

He would usually sit in the seat of honor with an arrogant face, but our proximity was close enough to share the light from the same candle stand. I could feel enormous pressure from him just sitting there.

After replacing the door bar, Ai Fa sat at a place that formed a triangle with me and Donda Wu.

We were so close that our knees were almost touching.

Donda Wu pushed the bottle towards the tip of Ai Fa's nose and said: 「Drink.」

「Drink it, and swear... swear that you will only speak your true thoughts.」

Ai Fa drank the fruit wine quietly without hesitation.

She coolly took a large swig of alcohol.

And then passed the bottle to me.

The mood right now didn't seem to permit me who was underage to refuse. To avoid choking, I carefully tilted the bottle, and took a mouthful of fruit wine.

Ara, it tasted sour and sweet.

「... Brat, what are you actually scheming?」

Donda Wu started his talking:

「The Wu clan is not related to you by blood nor your benefactor. So why are you spouting nonsense about bonds with the Wu clan? Just what are you scheming?」

No matter how composed or quiet, he was still a burly man who looked like the incarnation of a kiba. His eyes were bright in the dim night, and his huge body emitted pressure.

I don't have any schemes —— When I was thinking about answering that way, I held back and realized I couldn't speak like that.

Since he forbid me from lying, the best option was to confess everything truthfully——

「Instead of scheming, I was driven by one thought. That's to earn your acknowledgement, Donda Wu.」

「... Acknowledgement?」

「Yes. No matter what cuisine I served, I will only cook dinner for one night. I'm the hearth tender for the Fa house after all, and the Wu clan won't let me tend the hearth that often. But if that is the case—— if I only serve you a delicious meal for one night, can you grasp the meaning and value of these cooking? I started to doubt that.」

I never thought I would be making another speech tonight.

But this was the reason behind everything I did today, so there was no other way.

「For example, if I put in a lot of effort to prepare a delicious meal, will you receive calm and satisfaction from that? If I'm a restaurant owner and you are a guest, then things might be settled like this. But if I barged into your house to serve you food because you said 『there's no distinction of food being delicious or not』? And then you say adamantly 『it's tasty, but so what?』 Then everything ends」

「.....」

「You are the head of the Wu clan, if enjoying delicious food is something you did together with your family—— if the dishes are made by your family instead of some weird outsider—— if you yourself can tell it is delicious, I think your soul will be more serene and satisfied than ever before.」

「.....」

「That's why I prepared three types of meat, it's a way to earn your acknowledgement. If I only prepared steak or hamburg steak, some might think hamburg steak is delicious, and will be unhappy if they can't taste it again. In that case, I want these three type of meat dish to compete with the hamburg steak. That way, everyone will be able to easily understand what you and Jiba Wu meant by 『Everyone has different opinion on what is right, and what is delicious』.」

「Why exactly... are you doing this, what do you stand to gain? To bet the life of you and your house head for this?」

Donda Wu said with a deep voice.

I sighed and said:

「You are the one who said anything about breaking off ties, right? Ai Fa and I are more headstrong than you think... After all, we are so stubborn that we didn't listen to Grandma Jiba's advice, which probably had you worried too, right? If you announce that you are breaking off ties with us, Rimee Wu and the others will definitely hate you.」

Donda Wu's knees shook.

Just that was enough to make me feel that I was in mortal danger. But I was furious about what happened this time and continued:

「I don't know what your true intention is, and don't want to ask you either, but please be careful about risking your bonds with your family. You think Ai Fa and I will flee if you bring up the Lutim house and escalate this incident? If we fail, the Wu clan will have to break ties with the Fa house, and there will friction in your relationship with Rimee Wu and your other family members, isn't that serious? I can't ask you to think much of an outsider like me, but if you make things difficult and arduous for others because of an idea you thought up on a whim, and risk the bonds with your family, that will be too foolish.」

「Brat, you little...」

「It's fine for you to hate Ai Fa and me. But Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu cherish her deeply and think of her as family. Please don't forget that... If you still think of yourself as the head of the Wu clan.」

I decided to tell him what I think was right.

If I had a bit of doubt or fear in my actions—— I probably would have lost control of my bladder, wailed out in tears or burrow my head into the ground.

That was how intense Donda Wu's gaze was. He had already abandoned his composure and was burning up like a beast.

I witnessed these eyes three days ago. The group of hunters heading into the forest all had these eyes of a warrior.

「I—— still don't understand Forest's Edge.」

As his eyes seem to be scorching my very soul, I put together my words subconsciously:

「All of you are different from the people I know... Honestly, I won't be able to understand or empathize with you in the future either. However, I still hope to be a medicine, not a poison.

That's what I sincerely think. My only good point is knowing how to cook... I hope I can stay true to myself and live here in Forest's Edge.」

What kind of expression was Ai Fa showing?

The intensity of her gaze was probably as strong as Donda Wu—— but I couldn't pull my eyes away from this large man to confirm.

「Like what I described earlier, chefs are not needed to cook a family meal. What you are after isn't the cooking of a chef, but the serenity in your soul when you enjoy your time with your family—— If there is anything wrong with this conclusion I made, I will return all the blessings I received from the Wu clan to you.」

The shadow—— stood up slowly.

Ai Fa quickly stood between me and the shadow.

「... I will ask you again. Why are you willing to risk your life for this?」

Perhaps he was overwhelmed with rage, his voice lacked emotion and sounded cold. It echoed in the room like thunder.

「Because I'm a chef. Just like you being a hunter, I'm a chef... Although I'm just an immature half assed chef.」

I tried to answer humorously.

After a few seconds that seemed to last an eternity——

Donda Wu finally turned his back to me and said:

「I'm a hunter, I can't fathom the thoughts of the likes of you.」

He muttered quietly without any emotions, then headed for the entrance.

He picked up his shoes with his right hand and didn't put them on. After removing the door bar, he said quietly:

「... Speaking of unfathomable, that stupid old man from house Lutim wants me to pass a message.」

「Eh?」

「He wants you to tend the hearth for the wedding seven days later... The head of the Lutim actually said something so outrageous, looks like their house's days are numbered.」

I couldn't close my wide open mouth.

What was that old man thinking?

As I was in a daze, something rolled to my feet.

Donda Wu tossed something over from the entrance.

That was —— A tusk and a horn that was white as snow, with a majestic bend on them.

「Those are blessings.」 After saying that, Donda Wu's large body disappeared into the darkness.

「... So this incident has finally ended.」

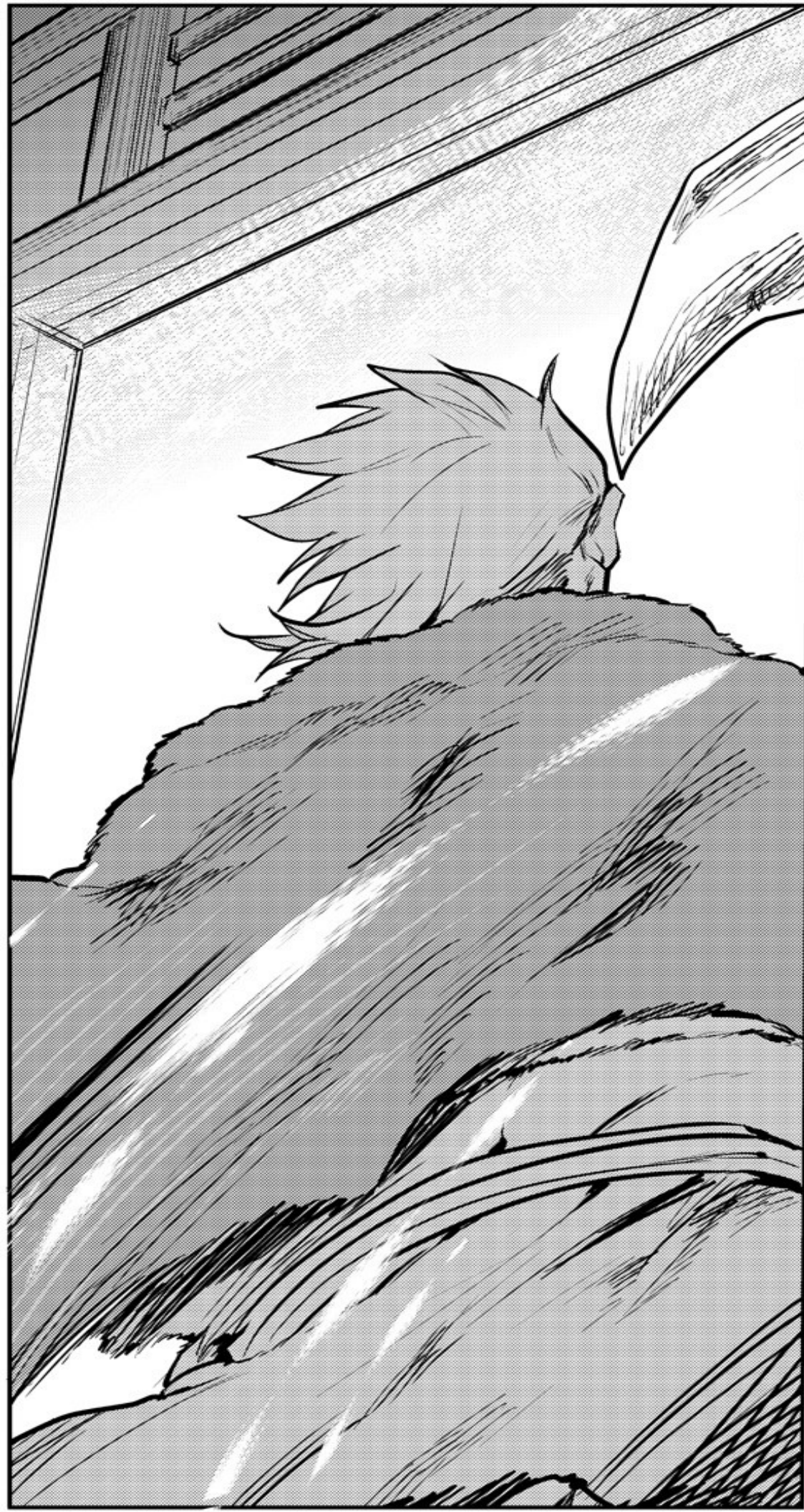
I picked them up, and handed one of them to Ai Fa.

My fingers were still shaking, how shameful.

Ai Fa accepted it in silence, and stood up to bar the door.

「Sigh... I feel like my lifespan has shortened by several years.」

Leaning on the wall, my eyes followed her figure.



I had been breaking out in cold sweat all this time.

However, I have finally —— put an end to this dispute.

It all started with my willfulness, a once in a lifetime battle of the tongues.

「However, is the part about me tending to the hearth for the wedding a joke? No matter what, that's too heavy a responsibility! I have to turn this job down.」

Ai Fa didn't answer, and walked back after setting the door bar.

She had been quiet for quite some time now.

By the way, Ai Fa didn't speak at all when Donda Wu was here.

While I was looking at Ai Fa with doubtful eyes, she came towards me with smooth strides.

She then —— sat down right before me.

Her pink lips slowly formed the word 「I」.

「... I don't want.」

「W-What?」

「I don't want you to suddenly disappear.」

Her voice was calm as usual, and didn't raise her volume.

There was no tears in her wild cat-like eyes either.

Her fingers didn't touch me.

Her shoulders weren't trembling.

Ai Fa just looked into my eyes quietly.

Apéritif - The Way of the Hunter

Part 1

Ai Fa's father Gill concluded his life as a hunter, and perished in the forest.

It happened a month after Ai Fa's fifteenth birthday.

Gill Fa was a strong man who completes his job as a hunter perfectly, and no one could match him.

Ai Fa was proud of him.

However, Ai Fa lost him.

It was natural for hunters to perish in the forest. In Forest's Edge, almost all men met their demise in the forest, with only a scant few living to a ripe age. Hence, Gill Fa who hunted kiba more than anyone else, and was gouged to death by the horns of a kiba lived his life correctly —— Ai Fa believed that was the truth.

However, Ai Fa was still filled with sorrow.

She lost her only family.

Her mother died a long time ago, and the Fa house didn't have any branch family or kin. The Fa house's bloodline had started diminishing decades ago, and now, everyone except Ai Fa had passed on.

How should I live my life from now on?

The moonlight shone into the dim house. Ai Fa leaned weakly against the wall with her late father's hunter cape around her, and hugged her knees.

Her father would often tease her that her sitting posture was just like a child.

However, her father was gone.

The hunter's cape made from the hide of the kiba, the sabre and knife that had gone through countless battles, and the pride of the hunter—— a necklace of tusks and horns. Ai Fa only brought these items back, and buried Gill Fa's remains in the forest.

Gill Fa's soul had returned to the forest.

He will now watch over Ai Fa with his other ancestors.

For the hunters of Forest's Edge, this was the correct way to treat death. They forbid family members from being overwhelmed by sorrow.

As a denizen of Forest's Edge, was it wrong for her chest to be filled with pain and sadness? Ai Fa was still young, and couldn't even understand this.

Even if it's only for a few more days, I wish my father Gill had taught me more about hunting... I actually have such thoughts. No one will permit me to live as a hunter...

She touched the necklace and leather sheath on the floor.

Did she have the rights to inherit her late father's belongings? Ai Fa didn't know.

On Ai Fa's neck was the three tusks and horns gifted to her by her father.

The only hunting tool her father left her was a knife.

When Ai Fa was thirteen and old enough to venture deep into the forest, she started helping as a hunter. That include setting traps, locating kiba nest, masking one's scent and how to use the dangerous 『fruit that attracts kiba』. She had already learned the methods to live on as a hunter.

However, Gill Fa still didn't acknowledge her as a hunter in her own rights.

According to Gill Fa, because Ai Fa was a girl, she still needed more training if she wants to live as a hunter. Ai Fa thought so too.

When Ai Fa has the capability to become a hunter, she would need to bring a kiba she hunted home with her own hands, and ask the women from the neighbourhood to turn the kiba hide into a hunter's cape—— Gill Fa once said so.

Just one last step.



Just a bit more, and Ai Fa would have enough strength and skill to be a hunter in her own rights.

Ai Fa pulled her knees in closer.

She didn't have any family or kin, would she be able to live on alone as a hunter?

In Forest's Edge, was her decision correct?

She couldn't figure out the answer.

My Mother—— Mei hoped I can live on as a woman. When I started helping with hunter's work, my father Gill was overjoyed... which path should I take?

The gentle face of her elderly friend Jiba Wu appeared in her mind.

Just work towards the path that you feel is right—— When Ai Fa shared her aspiration to be a hunter with Jiba Wu, Jiba Wu advised her as such.

But even her idea of what was right and what she wanted to do was getting vague.

What should I do——

She buried her face into her knees, and felt as if she was wandering in a maze with no exit.

At this moment—— a strange noise erupted in the darkness.

It sounded like something creaking.

What is that noise?

Normally, she would stand up immediately and seek out the source.

But Ai Fa couldn't squeeze out the strength tonight.

Her arms and legs were tired. Her heart was weak. Her father passed away just a few hours ago, and Ai Fa's mind and body was still caught in a swamp of sorrow.

Did the kiba come to the settlement? The forest didn't just want to summon my father's soul, and wants to take me too?

And of course, even if a kiba entered a human settlement, it wouldn't use its horns to ram into the hard walls of the house. But Ai Fa couldn't stop her thoughts from going wild.

And then—— Something as incredible as kibas attacking the settlement happened.

The door inside the room was opened roughly by someone.

It was the storage room, which wasn't connected to the door leading outside. Ai Fa always checked all the rooms whenever she got home, before she barred the entrance.

Even so, someone still opened the door from the room inside.

A tall man with a candle stand appeared before Ai Fa—— He wore the attire of a hunter, and was a youth from Forest's Edge.

「Yo, I'm here for a visit, Ai Fa of house Fa...」

His speech was slurred and sounded irritating.

He was an unfamiliar man.

He looked just a bit older than Ai Fa. He wore the clothes of a hunter, a necklace of tusks and horns on his chest, and a sabre by his waist.

「Who... Who the heck are you? How did you get into this house?」

「I'm the eldest son of the Tsun clan, Diga Tsun, the eldest son of the main house.」

The Tsun clan was the tribal chief house of Forest's Edge.

Since he was the eldest son of the Tsun clan, that meant he would become the tribal chief one day.

「I wanted to meet you about something. It's a bit rude, but I came in through the window.」

The windows were covered with wooden grates.

Was the strange noise earlier the sound of him breaking the grates?

Ai Fa didn't feel angry, and was just astonished.

「How foolish... leaving aside the fact that you damaged my house, it's a serious taboo to barge into someone else's house without permission from a family member. What are you thinking?」

「I'm thinking about taking you.」

The candle stand illuminated this youth from below—— a twisted smile appeared on Diga Tsun's face.

At this moment, Ai Fa finally realized how perilous her situation was, but it was too late. Before she could pick up the sabre on the ground, Diga Tsun laughed out loud and pounced on her.

Diga Tsun blew out the candle crudely, and his huge body turned into a dark shadow.

The shadow tossed aside the extinguished candle and pressed down on Ai Fa's body with both arms.

「I heard about it. Your father, who is also your only family member is dead. How do you plan to live from now on...?」

「That doesn't concern you!」

Ai Fa kept struggling, but Diga Tsun's thick fingers gripped her wrists tightly.

He pressed her down against the rug and straddled onto her waist. No matter how much she twist and turn, his heavy body wouldn't barge.

Ai Fa was tall for a fifteen year old girl, and her body was toned from her harsh work as a hunter. But the difference in body weight was too great.

Diga Tsun rode on top of Ai Fa and whispered into her ears:

「Of course it concerns me. Ai Fa, I want to take you into the Tsun clan as a family member.」

「A Tsun family member?」

「That's right, I will be the next tribal chief after all. I can't marry a woman from the Fa house that is weak, but no one will complain if I only make you a Tsun family member. Houses that couldn't sustain themselves have to rely on the strength of the powerful clans to survive in the first place.」

「.....」

「So give up on the Fa name, and be a Tsun clan member. I can then take care of you for the rest of your life.」

Illuminated by the pale moonlight, his detestable face had a gleeful expression as he licked his lips.

Ai Fa felt her pulse beating intensely within her chest and glared at him.

「... Is it true that the Tsun clan don't do their work as hunters properly, and spend all day drinking and playing with the reward given by Rock City?」

When he heard what Ai Fa said, Diga Tsun scowled his mouth menacingly and answered:

「If you want to know the truth, then become a Tsun family member. Once you are part of the tribal chief clan, you can live your life however you wish.」

「... And you call yourself a denizen of Forest's Edge!?」

Ai Fa roared and rammed her right knee onto Diga Tsun's back.

As he was straddled on top of her, she couldn't exert too much strength. But Diga Tsun didn't expect the sudden attack and stumbled forward.

Ai Fa used a head butt onto his face.

「Uwah!」

Blood spew out as Diga Tsun wailed.

Her nose bridge was probably broken. Diga Tsun fell off Ai Fa with his hands on his face, and rolled around in pain.

「You are a man, but didn't do your job as a hunter properly, violate the taboos and even assault women—— you don't have the rights to call yourself a denizen of Forest's Edge!」

「Ugghh!」

Diga Tsun screamed and flee towards the entrance.

He pulled off the door bar, opened the door, and stumbled outside. Ai Fa picked up her father's sabre and gave chase as she shouted: 「Stop right there.」

A rage Ai Fa couldn't understand filled Ai Fa's entire body.

As if the sorrow of losing her father had been turned into anger.

Why...

Why did an excellent hunter like her father died, but a despicable man like him still lives?

Why did the forest bring such an unreasonable fate to its denizens?

Diga Tsun stumbled around like a wounded beast under the pale moonlight, and Ai Fa chased after him. When she realized it, Ai Fa was already roaring out loud:

「Stop right there, criminal scum! Pay for the law you transgressed!」

「Hiii!!」

The sabre was probably too heavy, so Ai Fa couldn't catch Diga Tsun.

However, when they crossed the flat ground near the Lante river bank, Diga Tsun lost his footing and fell.

He laid like that on the ground, panting hard as he looked at Ai Fa.

His face was twisted from horror and filled with blood and tears.

「W-Wait! I admit it's my fault! Please forgive me!」

「Are you really a member of the chief clan... No, are you really a denizen of Forest's Edge?」

Ai Fa's breathing was slightly ragged, she raised her sabre with both hands——

It was a heavy steel blade.

When he saw Ai Fa reached for the sheath, Diga Tsun shouted even more frantically:

「Y-You want to slash at a member of the chief clan with a blade? You think the Tsun clan will permit that!? Ai Fa, if you kill me, the Tsun clan will execute you!」

「Stop joking with me! Even if you are a member of the chief clan, you still need to be punished for breaking the rules!」

「W-What are you accusing me of!? I didn't do anything! Killing the innocent is a serious taboo!?」

「... I see. It's true that you didn't do anything to me. You only made me lie onto the floor, I can't ask you to give up your life.」

Ai Fa said with an ice cold voice and close in on Diga Tsun.

「But you entered a home without the permission of the owner. According to the rules, you must offer a toe to atone for this crime.」

「Hyaa!」 Diga Tsun screamed like a girl and crawled away on the hard rocky ground.

「Please! Forgive me! I just want to invite you into the Tsun clan! I can't leave a beautiful woman like you alone!」

「You moron...」

Ai Fa's voice was trembling from rage, but she realized that her heart was cooling rapidly.

This was a sabre used to hunt kiba. Left to her by her late father Gill Fa, an important blade used by hunters. It would be foolish to stain this blade with the blood of a despicable man like him.

「... Someone not worth killing. Does this term applies to a man like you, Diga Tsun of the Tsun clan?」

Diga Tsun slowly raised his head.

The bridge of his nose was twisted and his face covered in blood. He noticed Ai Fa's hesitation, and a despicable smile appeared on his face.

「That's right, even if you hurt me, your father won't come back to life, right? I won't snitch on you, just come with me to the Tsun clan...」

Ai Fa smacked Diga Tsun's face with the sheathed sabre.

Diga Tsun's weak yelp was dragged out, and his large body fell into the Lante stream with a 'poop'.

「W-What are you doing! You eccentric violent woman! How dare you oppose the Tsun clan, don't think this matter is over...!」

Ai Fa ignored Diga Tsun who was drifting downstream, turned around and headed home.

She walked with her bare feet on the stoney ground, and the sabre wrapped tightly in her arms.

The heavy hunter's blade left behind by her late father didn't tell Ai Fa anything.

Some time earlier.

The wail of a child echoed inside the Wu clan's main house.

The entire family had gathered for dinner. Normally, this would be a happy time for everyone filled with laughter, but there was only sorrowful cries tonight.

The one crying nonstop was the youngest daughter of the Wu clan, Rimee Wu.

Rimee Wu was just six. She sipped on the white murky soup and bit the thin slices of kiba thigh meat, and had been crying since earlier. As she was consuming the life that had been hunted today, she couldn't neglect the important dinner. Even though she was crying, she still kept eating.

「Hey—— that's enough, Rimee.」

After her father uttered a deep voice that reminds others of a tremor, the crying stopped immediately.

But the sound of sniveling, uncontrollable sobbing and eating continued.

「Hey! I told you that's enough, didn't you hear me!?」

Her father—— the head of the Wu clan, Donda Wu finally exploded.

Rimee Wu shook, then looked at her father timidly, but the tears didn't stop rolling down her smooth cheeks.

「Because... Because Gill Fa died... Even though Gill Fa is so young, and so strong...」

「No matter how young or strong, it isn't strange for a hunter to succumb to the forest. It's not wrong to mourn his death, but going overboard will tarnish his honor as a hunter.」

The one who answered wasn't the clan head, but the eldest son Jiza Wu.

Jiza Wu stared at Rimee Wu with his slit-like eyes. He then tilted his thick neck a little and asked:

「By the way, who is this Gill Fa? I have never heard of this family name before.」

「Rimee and Grandma Jiba are close to a girl named Ai Fa, and Gill Fa is her father... But all I knew about him is his name.」

The youngest son Ludo Wu bit on his meat and turned to his brother beside him.

「Darum-nii, you have seen that old man before, right? You have been accompanying father to the house head conference since last year.」

「Yes. He is a weird man.」

Darum drank some fruit wine, then spoke disinterestedly:

「Even though he attended alone, he had plenty of tusks and horns on his chest. He looked unassuming, but is a suspicious character.」

「He's not suspicious at all! Gill Fa is a powerful hunter!」

Rimee Wu yelled and her tears fell again uncontrollably.

「But he got killed by a kiba... Ai Fa will be alone now...」

「The Fa house is just that father and his daughter? In that case, his daughter have to marry into a kin house, and become their family.」

Jiza Wu answered calmly, but Rimee Wu shook her head hard, her reddish brown hair frailing about.

「The Fa house don't have any kins... What will happen to Ai Fa...」

「No kins? How did that Gill Fa hunt kiba without the help of any family or kins? No matter how powerful a hunter is, he can't hunt alone.」

No one answered this question.

After a moment of silence, the second brother Darum Wu muttered unhappily:

「That's why I said he is suspicious.」

「He's not suspicious! After Ai Fa turned 13, she had been helping him hunt! In this two years, their family hunts with two people, not one!」

「What? Why must a woman help to hunt?」

「That's because...」 Rimee Wu stammered a little.

「... Because Ai Fa wants to be a hunter, so she naturally started helping Gill Fa...」

「A woman becoming a hunter?」

The women of the Wu clan had been listening in quietly, but even they gasped after hearing this.

Except for Rimee Wu and Grand Elder Jiba Wu, no one knew much about Ai Fa. Ever since Jiba Wu got confined to her bed due to illness last month, even walking to the hall was too much for her to bear. Right now, Ditto Min Wu was accompanying her in her bedroom.

「What a surprise. Normally, when they lose their family and kin, he should have joined another family as a member together with his daughter. They might lose their family name, but life is irreplaceable.」

「That's right. He even got his daughter to hunt! Unfathomable.」

「Didn't I already said!? Ai Fa helped to hunt voluntarily! Stupid Ludo, don't talk bad about Ai Fa and Gill Fa!」

「Shut up bratty Rimee, don't vent your anger out on me!」

「Ludo is a brat too! Bratty Ludo! Stupid Ludo!」

Ludo Wu puffed his cheeks and wanted to rebuke her. But when he saw the pained expression on his sister's face, he also showed a sorrowful expression.

「... But since her father died, then Ai Fa had to rely on other families. If she marries into a neighbouring house, she can live on like a normal woman, together with her father's share.」

「That's right. For the denizens of Forest's Edge, this is the right way to live.」

Jiza Wu's words was the cue to end this topic.

Rimee Wu started eating dinner depressedly. And Donda Wu—— aside from lashing out at the very beginning, he didn't speak again.

His blue eyes that was burning more brightly than anyone else had a thoughtful gleam about him. However, none of his family realized that.

Part 2

「Ai Fa, what happened!?」

The one shouting was the daughter of the Von house who lived near the Fa house ——Celice Von.

Ai Fa don't interact with others often, and she was one of her few friends.

「As you can see, I'm repairing a damaged window grate.」

Ai Fa answered crudely as she sawed some wood.

The time was between dawn and noon. Ai Fa finished her chores of gathering firewood and herbs as usual, and was working hard to repair the window grate damaged by Diga Tsun last night.

Ai Fa kept the hunter's cape and sabre carefully in her house. Like Celice Von, she wore the simple clothes of a woman. Celice Von rushed to her side and said:

「How awful... How did it break so thoroughly? It's like someone slid a sabre or something into the window and forcefully broke the window grates.」

「That's probably how it was done. He did something absolutely barbaric and added unnecessary work for me.」

Even though her father just passed away, Ai Fa didn't look any different than usual. Celice Von was relieved after seeing her like this, and a smile appeared on her skinny face.

But she frowned again and asked:

「Someone did something so mean? What was he trying to do?」

「Who knows? No matter what his goal is, I won't forgive his actions. I didn't cut off his toe, but I threw him into the Lante river.」

「I see... Did someone from the town sneak in here?」

Celice Von's face turned a little pale as she fidgeted her hands.

Ai Fa stopped sawing and looked at the worried face of her childhood friend.

「How is it possible for someone from town to enter Forest's Edge? That lawless man claim to be Diga Tsun.」

「Diga Tsun... Eh? Ai Fa, isn't that the name of the Tsun chief clan?」

「That's right, that's the name he gave. I heard the chief clan is extremely depraved, so it really is true.」

Celice Von's face turned green.

「A-Ai Fa... Do you know what you are saying? The Tsun clan is the chief clan that leads the denizens of Forest's Edge. The eldest son of the Tsun clan will become the tribal chief one day...」

「Yes, that's why that despicable man probably gave a fake name. Since he did something so lawless, he probably won't hesitate in using someone else's name.」

「T-That's not true, Ai Fa! There are some people in the Tsun clan who might actually do something so barbaric! Especially the eldest son of the Tsun clan... Everyone says that he easily loses his reason whenever he sees a beauty.」

Beauty is such an unnecessary thing... Ai Fa showed an annoyed face.

「How can everyone permit such damnable acts? Wouldn't the rules of Forest's Edge lose its meaning?」

「Because the Tsun clan is stronger than the other houses... The only other clan that can stand up to the Tsun clan is the Wu clan.」

Ai Fa's expression became twisted, and she scratched her blonde hair hard.

「Then that damn thing is really the next tribal chief... How sad. That man doesn't have the ability to lead the people.」

「N-Now isn't the time to talk about this so casually! Ai Fa, did you really laid your hands on Diga Tsun?」

「That's right, I threw him into the Lante river.」

Celice Von fell weakly onto Ai Fa, and grabbed her shoulders flusteredly.

As women's clothing only covered their chest, Ai Fa's shoulders were bare.

Celice Von's hands are so warm—— Ai Fa thought to herself when her bare shoulders were grabbed.

「Ai Fa! Apologize to the Tsun clan! If that eldest son really committed the crime, they might forgive your actions... Anyway, just go!」

「What are you saying, I already showed him mercy. I only toss him into the Lante river, and has no reason to apologize. They should be grateful instead.」

「That reasoning won't work with the Tsun clan! Find a reliable man to accompany you... Ah, but the Fa house don't have any kins, right? What should we do...」

Ai Fa grabbed Celice Von's slender shoulders a little frustratedly and said:

「Celice Von, thank you for worrying about me. But since I didn't do anything wrong, I don't intend to apologize. Just ignore that fool.」

「How can you do that? He's from the chief clan.」

「... If the rumours are true, then the Tsun clan are just a bunch of people who don't do their hunter's job properly, so there's no need to fear them. If they come seeking revenge, I will retaliate and throw them all into the river.」

「But how... Even if you are strong, they just need to bring a few more men and there will be nothing you can do, right?」

「Who says I can't if I don't give it a try?」

Even if she couldn't, she didn't plan to give in.

If she couldn't live the way she wants, then she should let her soul return to the forest.

Ai Fa might be thinking about it this way, but Celice Von still looked anxious.

... Am I strange?

Human—— the denizens of Forest's Edge should live like this, that's what her late father taught her. Obey the rules, hunt kiba, live in the forest and die in the forest. That's how a denizen of Forest's Edge should be, that's how Ai Fa's father raised her.

However, Celice Von stared at Ai Fa forcefully unlike her usual self, as if Ai Fa was a fool who didn't understand logic. Celice Von was a kind girl, but the two of them often had clashes in opinion just like this.

Not just Celice Von, the Von house and Fou house were the same. They care about the Fa house even when they only had infrequent encounters, though they found it hard to accept Ai Fa and Gill Fa's behavior.

Their attitude was very obvious when they saw Ai Fa working as a hunter.

Women should do the jobs of women —— like gathering firewood, herbs, tanning hides, tending to the hearth and wait for the men to return from their hunt. Everyone shared the same opinion.

Ai Fa collects firewood and herbs, tends to the hearth, and although they didn't have enough numbers to tan hides, she had been working hand in hand with her father. Without any regards to their gender, they finished all their chores together.

In the Von house, the men would help the women too. When it was the off season for hunting kiba, the men would rest, but also help carry the water flask to the water source or help chop firewood. Ai Fa had witnessed men doing the jobs of women several times already.

Even so, they wouldn't permit a woman to be a hunter.

Women lack the strength to take on the job of a hunter —— that was the gist of their reasoning.

Ai Fa was not a hunter of her own right yet, but she was capable enough to assist in her father's work. If she was taller and had more muscles, she was confident in wielding a sabre like the men. Her speed and agility had already surpassed her father, when a kiba suddenly appear before her, she could fend it off with a knife too. 「With some more training, your capability won't bring shame to the title of hunter」 —— Gill Fa who was not being polite once told Ai Fa that.

There wasn't any rules in Forest's Edge that forbids women from being hunters.

Ai Fa certainly had the talent to be a hunter.

Even so, in Forest's Edge, only three people supported Ai Fa's wish to become a hunter. They were her father Gill Fa, Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu.

「Ai Fa... What are you going to do now?」

Celice Von finally said these difficult words:

「Gill Fa was a brave hunter, but he had succumbed to the forest. You don't have any other family or kin, how will you live now?」

「Well—」 Ai Fa closed her mouth mid sentence.

「Gill Fa was with you in the past, but now it's just you, a lone woman. You can't survive in Forest's Edge like this, you'll have to marry into another house, or invite someone else to be your family... Those are your only choices, right?」

「But the Fa house will end.」

「There's no difference of it being ended right now. Ai Fa, no matter how beautiful you are, no man will marry into a house that has no family or kin.」

「... I already told you not to describe my appearance with that term.」

Ai Fa pouted unhappily, and Celice Von finally smiled after apologizing.

「But it's true, right? Ai Fa, you're fifteen and is of marriageable age. There should be hordes of men asking for your hand, so I don't need to worry...」

「I don't plan to marry away. Instead of marrying away, I would rather become a member of another family and continue working as a hunter.」

「No one will accept a female hunter. Ai Fa, the job of women is to tend to the house, nurture the children and give birth to the next generation.」

Ai Fa said with a deep sigh:

「I don't want to marry out, and no man will want to marry me. Celice Von, you must be mistaken.」

「Not at all. Ai Fa, you are a really charming woman.」

Celice Von smiled and grabbed Ai Fa's fingers.

「Be it your light colored hair, facial features and slender body, every part of you is beautiful... Ai Fa, how are you able to hunt even though you are so thin?」

「I'm not as thin as you... And Celice Von, someone already proposed to you, right?」

When she heard Ai Fa's rebuttal, Celice Von answered with a blush:

「Yes... Ah, it's not confirmed yet. But I will probably marry into the Fou house.」

「Fou house... Then you won't be moving far at all.」

「That's right, the Von house and Fou house are kins after all... Ai Fa, why don't you marry into the Von house? Then we will become kins.」

After Celice Von said that, she frowned sorrowfully and continued:

「Before that, you need to settle that matter with the Tsun clan. If you have problems with the chief clan, you won't be able to marry...」

「... What happened to the Tsun clan?」

A little girl's voice suddenly came from below.

Ai Fa jumped aside on reflex, then glared at the person who spoke:

「Rimee Wu, I already told you plenty of times, don't go near others while hiding your presence!」

「Heehee, you seem lively, Ai Fa! I'm relieved!」

The petite little girl with fluffy red hair— Rimee Wu, looked at Ai Fa with a cheerful smile and said:

「... So, what happened to the Tsun clan?」

Dinner at the Wu clan was rowdier than last night.

Naturally, it was because of the shocking news Rimee Wu brought for her family——

「Hmmp... That stupid son of the Tsun clan actually did something so foolish.」

Donda Wu was all smiles today.

His smile was like a predator who found his prey.

「This is too retarded to believe. Just how depraved does he had to be to do something so despicable?」

The eldest son Jiza Wu had a gentle expression, but said something rather vicious.

The spouse of the clan head Mia Lei Wu sat opposite him, and said with a sigh:

「That Ai Fa is such a pitiful girl. She encountered something so terrible the night her father passed away... Rimee, what happened next?」

「Nothing happened! One of Ai Fa's friend advised her to apologize to the Tsun clan, but Ai Fa acted as she usually does. She said: 『I don't care if he is from the chief clan, I only let a scum taste his just desserts』 ... Will Ai Fa really be fine?」

Rimee Wu's eyes were already watery.

She will be fine—— No one dared confirmed that. For the past two decades, the tribal chief, Tsun clan had been on a downward spiral. The Wu clan could match the Tsun clan's power, so the Tsun clan don't dare to make any trouble openly. However, they would perform such cruel deeds in the dark, that was how despicable the Tsun clan was.

「Clan head, what should we do? Ai Fa might have an impressive spirit, but if she insist on her way, the neighbouring houses won't want to take her in, right?」

「Oh... You think so too?」

Donda Wu opened his mouth wide in a laugh, while his wife put down her half finished plate and said gloomily:

「Of course. The Fa house, Fou house and Von house are all names I never heard before. Which means they are all minor houses, and not related to the larger clans, right? So it's obvious that they won't dare oppose the Tsun clan.」

「That's only natural... But we have no obligations to help someone who isn't our kin, and the Fa house is some distance away from the Wu clan too. Frankly speaking, we can't help even if we want to, right?」

「That's true. The Fa house isn't our neighbours, and we can't guard over their home either.」

All the women of the Wu house, with Mia Lei Wu in the lead showed worried faces.

They were not related by blood, but Ai Fa was friends with their cherished family members Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu. No one knew how deep their friendship was, but they couldn't help rooting for Ai Fa when they saw how sad Rimee was.

「Darum, you are seventeen now, right?」

Donda Wu who was smiling like a beast looked at his second son.

His eyes were as sharp as his father. He nodded in surprise.

「In that case, you can marry now. How about taking in that wild girl as your wife?」

Everyone present yelped:

「Dad, are you serious? You want Darum-nii to marry that girl!? She's from a small house without any family or kin!」

The youngest brother Ludo Wu questioned his father on behalf of his family.

「That's right. You are just thirteen, and Jiza already have a great wife. In that case, Darum is the only man in this house who can marry her, right?」

「But...」

In Forest's Edge, blood relations were important to everyone.

Marriage was a means to strengthen a house in Forest's Edge. They would marry their daughter out in order to deepen their bonds with their kins, or to create new bonds with a powerful house.

「Clan head Donda, I don't know why you are so infatuated with the Fa house... In that case, how about letting her marry into a branch house, or a kin house like Lutim or Lei? If we include the branch house and kin house, there are tons of men who have not yet married.」

「Is that so?」

When he heard what the eldest son Jiza Wu said, Donda Wu retracted his sneer.

「Jiza, you want to push the wild girl who hit back at the Tsun clan to our branch house or kin house?」

「Yes, I think we should pay more attention to the bloodline of the Wu main house. As the eldest son, I have married a wife, but regrettably, we have not produced any heir yet —— If this goes on and I succumb to the forest, then Darum will be the next head, and his children will inherit the main house.」

Jiza Wu's wife Sati Lei Wu lowered her gaze meekly.

Donda Wu saw her reaction from the corner of his eyes, and snorted.

「It has just been a couple of years, don't be so narrow minded... And that eccentric father daughter pair hunted plenty of kiba by themselves, so their bloodline should produce great hunters. Even without family or kins, just their powerful bloodline will be enough.」

「Clan head Donda, this is just a guess——」

Jiza Wu's slit-like eyes narrowed even further.

「Clan head, do you have some history with that man Gill Fa? Aside from meeting at the house head conference, do you have deeper relations——」

「Not to that extent, I just have some run ins with him in the past.」

Donda Wu said impatiently as he waved his thick palms.

He then showed a cheerful smile, and looked at Darum who fell silent with a grumpy face.

「I know very well how great a hunter that weird man was. And I think there is merit in confirming whether his daughter is suitable for the Wu clan.」

After dinner, Rimee Wu visited Jiba Wu's chambers.

The bedridden Jiba Wu laid on many layers of sheets, and looked at Rimee Wu's face quietly.

「So... how do you wish things to turn out...?」

「I don't know. I don't want the Tsun clan to do anything mean to Ai Fa, but... I can't imagine Ai Fa becoming Darum-nii's wife.」

Rimee Wu was feeling suffocated by the pressure.

Jiba Wu used her thin fingers that looked like twigs, and closed it around Rimee's small fingers.

「Only the people involved will understand the fate between a man and a woman... If fate wills it, they will be together. If not, then nothing will happen... We don't need to worry, Ai Fa will definitely choose the correct path...」

「Well, if it is the usual Ai Fa, I won't be worried at all. But after Gill Fa died, Ai Fa... looks the same, but feels different.」

After hearing Rimee Wu say that, the corner of Jiba Wu's mouth trembled worryingly.

「Is that so...? Grandma has not seen Ai Fa for a long time, and have no idea how she is now... After losing her cherished father, Ai Fa must be drowning in sorrow...」

Rimee Wu and Gill Fa had met many times, but Jiba Wu had never visited the Fa house because her legs were weak. As the two houses were far apart, Jiba Wu and Ai Fa always met somewhere between their homes to deepen their friendship.

Jiba Wu first met Ai Fa four years ago. Rimee Wu was just two back then, and Jiba Wu took Rimee Wu who loves to stroll a bit farther than normal, and they met Ai Fa.

Two years after their meeting, Ai Fa who turned thirteen started helping her father with his work, so they met lesser than usual. Jiba Wu's waist and legs were getting bad, so their usual monthly meetings became once every two months—— until Jiba Wu became bedridden.

Rimee Wu had grown, and her family permit her to roam outside and play by herself. She would visit Ai Fa's place every fortnight. But Jiba Wu had not met Ai Fa for two months. During this time, Ai Fa lost her father.

「Rimee.....I leave Ai Fa to you...」

Jiba Wu said suddenly with a weak voice.

Just her voice made Rimee Wu showed a tearful face.

「Leave her to me? I can't do anything! Grandma Jiba, I can't speak as well as you!」

「You don't need to say anything... You just need to stay by her side... If you can accompany her with a smile, Ai Fa will definitely be fine...」

「How is it fine!? Grandma Jiba, please help Ai Fa too!」

Rimee Wu's big round eyes finally started tearing up.

Jiba Wu gazed at the little girl crying weakly with her eyes that had grown tired because of illness.

「Grandma... might not make it. Even if I recover, I won't be able to walk energetically again... I lost another tooth today...」

「I don't want that! Gill Fa already died, I don't want to see you go too! Didn't you promise? You say you will live and witness my marriage!」

「I want to see that moment too... But it is only natural for the old to die first... I have lived longer than all the denizens of Forest's Edge, so I do not fear death...」

「I don't know! Stupid Grandma Jiba!」

Rimee Wu grabbed Jiba Wu's frail chest and wailed loudly.

Jiba Wu hugged her petite back with trembling hands, and muttered quietly:

「I have lived long enough... so, Mother Forest... If you are really our mother, then please let the young ones obtain happiness... You can summon the soul of my old bones early and bestow your strength to these children...」

Part 3

The next day ——Ai Fa had unexpected guests.

It was the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu and his three sons.

「So you are the head of the Wu clan... I'm Ai Fa of house Fa.」

The blazing afternoon sun shone on Ai Fa's neck, and she showed a stiff expression and acknowledged the other party with her gaze. They were standing at the entrance of the Fa house. She ran into three burly men when she was stepping out to dry pico leaves.

「I became friends with Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu of house Wu by chance. I heard that Jiba Wu is bedridden, how is she now?」

「Her illness is not life threatening anymore, but she had turned emotionally frail. It's hard for her to walk by herself... Hmmp, you have guts.」

Donda Wu's large body was twice Ai Fa's size, and he sized Ai Fa up with his fierce eyes.

These men are powerful—— Ai Fa sighed in her heart.

Not just Donda Wu, his eldest son was almost his height too, with a body filled with strength. The second son was young, but he was tall and well built. His eyes were filled with life like a beast, just like his father.

The youngest son still had a childish appearance. He was in a hunter's attire, but only had three tusks and horns on his neck, just like Ai Fa, and didn't emit too much pressure. This youth should be thirteen, and just received permission to enter the forest.

If I was assaulted by such burly men two days ago, I wouldn't have escaped.

This made Ai Fa feel flustered.

She couldn't compare to these men at all. Ai Fa couldn't fight them or even escape—— she could feel this very clearly.

Ai Fa felt that she could defeat the youth named Ludo Wu, but only because he was too young. Once he accumulated experience as a hunter for a year or two, he would become as strong as his brothers and father. Such a thought arose in her because she could feel the power budding within this youth.

「... So, why have you come to visit?」

Donda Wu stroked his beard that looked as thick as steel wires, and glared at Ai Fa.

「I see...」 He finally muttered.

「Your hair color and face resembles your mother. But those eyes —— Hmmp, the blood of that eccentric man definitely flows in your veins.」

「Donda Wu, you know my parents?」

Ai Fa asked in surprise, but Donda Wu answered coldly: 「I met them a few times before.」

「I don't have any deep relationship with them, and only met your mother once when I was young. In recent years, I will only see your father during the house head conference... Never mind that, Ai Fa of house Fa, I heard you have some bad blood with the Tsun clan?」

「Yes, but nothing worth mentioning.」

Ai Fa commented honestly.

Compared to the men before her, Diga Tsun was just a toothless giant rat. Men who couldn't complete their job as a hunter would only possess such meagre power.

「It seems that I have underestimated you. So getting on the bad side of the chief clan is a trivial matter to you? But Ai Fa of house Fa, no matter how skilled your hunting skills may be, you are still a woman.」

「... You don't need to tell me that.」

「In that case, act like one. If you do that, I will consider letting you marry into the Wu clan.」

Ai Fa was shocked.

Because Rimee Wu learned about that incident with Diga Tsun, so Ai Fa knew they would mention that sooner or later—— but Ai Fa didn't expect what he just said at all.

「Clan head Donda Wu, are you mad? I don't have any family or kin. What good will it do to the Wu clan to take someone like me in?」

「I'm the one who will decide if doing so is to the Wu clan's favor. But this topic can't continue if I don't ask the opinion of the subject himself... How about it, Darum? Are you willing to take this wild girl as your wife?」

He asked his son that was second in height.

The second brother of the Wu clan, Darum Wu—— His eyes that was a bit more gloomy than his father narrowed a little, as if he was observing a sparkling object.

「... I don't have anyone I fancy. If she is of help to the Wu clan, I don't mind marrying anyone.」

「No, I...」

「However, if it was a woman engrossed in pretending to be a hunter like a man, then I will pass.」

Darum cut Ai Fa off and said his piece.

「The women's duty is to watch over the family. If a woman can't do that, I will think that woman is worthless.」

「That is very true. Ai Fa of house Fa, do you have the resolve to live on as a woman?」

Four pairs of eyes imbued with all sorts of emotions stared sharply at Ai Fa.

As if she was resisting their gaze, Ai Fa said:

「I will be the one who will decide my own life! This is the first time I have seen any of you, I don't understand why must I be interrogated by you all!」

「I already told you, I hope you can marry into my family. What a helpless girl.」

Donda Wu laughed softly.

It was a rather infuriating laugh—— However, it didn't have any malice or hostility in it.

「Ai Fa of house Fa, you have bad blood with the Tsun clan, and won't be able to rest easily from now on. But if you become a member of the Wu clan, they will never lay their hands on you.」

「You might be right——」

「On top of that, you are already friends with members of the Wu clan. I can't stand by idly and let the Tsun clan take away anyone who calls the Wus a friend.」

Another type of smile appeared slowly on Donda Wu's face that was as rough as a crater.

It was a ferocious and feral smile.

「I will make an oath here —— Ai Fa of house Fa, if you become a Wu, we will protect you no matter what sacrifices we have to make. If the Tsun clan lay their hands on you—— we will destroy the Tsun clan.」

「You want to—— destroy the Tsun clan?」

「That's right. About twenty years ago, the Wu clan failed to decimate out the Tsun clan. We will gladly take up arms to wipe away the shame of that failure.」

Ai Fa also heard about the feud between the Wu clan and the Tsun clan. The Tsun clan abducted a woman that was supposed to marry into the Wu clan, and killed her.

There was no evidence, so the Wu clan couldn't make any moves.

The Wu clan and the Tsun clan were the two strongest families in Forest's Edge. If total war broke out between them, the entire Forest's Edge settlement would fall. Hence, the two sides lived these two decades begrudgingly despite the huge grievance.

The fury and regret burned in this burly man's body intensely.

Ai Fa grit her teeth in the face of his intense aura.

He was —— an intimidating man.

It filled Ai Fa with fear. But the incredible thing was ... This pressure also enchanted her.

A human... A hunter, can actually be so powerful and strong.

This man named Donda Wu not only surpassed Ai Fa, he might even defeat her father Gill Fa.

Her father Gill Fa who wasn't fazed by anything, and Donda Wu who was like a raging fire. It was hard to tell who had the upper hand, but this man might be slightly stronger than her father. Even though Ai Fa only had half baked abilities, she could still tell that.

This man might be able to destroy the chief clan—— the Tsun clan

Was this the right course for Forest's Edge?

If the chief clan dies, wouldn't it mean the death of the entire Forest's Edge denizens?

Ai Fa grit her teeth to stop them from clattering, and endured the chill flowing through her body.

If she didn't do that, the pressure from this man would crush her, and leave her lying on the floor.

「...Ai Fa of house Fa, decide for yourself which route you will take.」

Donda Wu turned and left after saying that.

「I will be back three days from now. Make your decision before that day, bear in mind that we hope you can be a member of the Wu clan.」

Just what do they want me to do...

Ai Fa chopped wood behind her house. She had been troubling over this for an entire day.

After losing her father Gill Fa, she felt troubled everyday. This situation didn't improve, and she became even more troubled with each passing day.

Should I live as a hunter, or as a woman... The Wu clan proposed to me before I can even decide this. Damn it, what is that man Donda Wu thinking!?

Marrying into the Wu clan was a completely unexpected proposition for Ai Fa.

If she gave up on being a hunter and make up her mind to marry —— she will live in the same house as her friends of many years Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu, and become a family. That was even more incredulous than Celice Von asking her to marry into the Von house.

The second brother Darum Wu also had Jiba Wu's blood in his veins. If Ai Fa bore Darum Wu's child, that child would have Jiba Wu's blood too.

The idea was mesmerizing, but it also filled her with fear.

So that's what becoming a kin is like...

Did every couple become wedded after making such a resolve?

She inherited the Fa bloodline of her father Gill Fa and mother Mei Fa, which would merge with the bloodline of Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu's clan, and a new life would be bloodborne.

That would be a bliss.

It was so blissful that it felt surreal.

But...

She didn't have any feelings for Darum Wu.

That was only natural, they only met today after all. She didn't talk much with him, and obviously won't feel anything special about him.

No, there were some who would wish for another to be their spouse at first sight. But Ai Fa didn't feel that way when she saw that young man.

If she had to say, Darum Wu was the type that made her feel guarded, and his abilities as a hunter should be exceptional. Ai Fa thought he was arrogant, had a sharp aura about him like a blade, and his body overflowing with excessive power. Was this really the brother of that Rimee Wu? Ai Fa was suspicious of that.

She couldn't imagine marrying that man.

The thoughts of becoming relatives with Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu filled her with joy. But the other party wouldn't permit her to marry into the family for such a reason.

Furthermore, doing so might not make Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu happy.

For Ai Fa, they were irreplaceable friends. However, Jiba Wu had many family and kins, so Ai Fa should be a trivial existence to Jiba Wu.

She wasn't doubting Jiba Wu's sincerity. But aside from her parents, Ai Fa had no other relatives. Her mother two years ago, and her father died two days ago. The gulf in the standings between Ai Fa and Jiba Wu's family was too huge.

For Ai Fa, Jiba Wu, Rimee Wu, and Celice Von were her few friends, and her emotional support.

However, Jiba Wu had ten or so family, about twenty branch family members and about 70 kins.

In terms of the all important blood relationship, Ai Fa's existence was less important compared to them.

Even so, she didn't care. Even if she ranked 101st in the heart of the person she cherish, their smile and words would still bring her joy.

We might not be related by blood, but we are still friends.

She continued to chop wood while thinking about this.

At this moment — she felt a presence behind her.

Ai Fa deftly jumped away, tossed aside the heavy machete³ and grabbed the knife on her waist.

「Sorry, did I alarm you?」

The one standing there wasn't from the Tsun clan or Wu clan, but the Fou house.

3 <http://deadliestfiction.wikia.com/wiki/Nata>

She didn't know his name, but she remembered that he was the younger brother of their house head, a quiet man of about twenty.

「What's the matter? Shouldn't the men be in the forest by this time?」

「That's right, well... It's shameful, but I sprained my ankle yesterday while hunting. I can't catch up with the kiba with my legs, so I had to rest for a day.」

This man was tall, but a bit thin.

After seeing the men from the Wu clan, this was even more obvious. Even the youngest son of the Wu clan was more powerful than this young man.

If it's just this much, I don't need to run, I can take him... No, that thinking is too prideful.

Since he was from the Fou house she was acquainted with, Ai Fa had no reason to defeat him.

But their dealings were shallow, so this young man had no reason to talk with her so intimately.

「And? You have some business with me? I'm working right now.」

「Erm... Actually, I saw the head of the Wu clan just now. The Wu territory should be further south... I was thinking if he was heading back after visiting the Fa house...」

He spoke slowly.

As someone from the Fou house, he should know that Rimee Wu visits the Fa house often. So it wasn't a surprise for this young man to guess that much.

Ai Fa picked up the machete she tossed aside, then answered as she tapped the back of the blade on her shoulder.

「The head of the Wu clan and his family did visit the Fa house. I was surprised by his sudden visit.」

「I see... What's the reason behind his visit...?」

「... It's something I would rather not share.」

Ai Fa replied honestly.

When he heard her answer, a strong sense of unease appeared on the thin face of that young man.

「Ai Fa of house Fa, you can tease me if you want to, if my assumption is different from the facts —— but did they ask you to marry into the Wu clan?」

「How do you know that?」

Ai Fa couldn't help asking back.

The young man's face scowled depressedly.

「As I expected... Ai Fa, you are beautiful, so I thought this might happen... But...」

「Second brother of Fou house, can you not say that so frivolously? That is rude.」

Ai Fa suppressed her urge to click her tongue and complained. The young man then went near her and said earnestly:

「It's not frivolously at all. Ai Fa of house Fa, you are a beauty. I have been thinking that since much earlier—— since several years ago.」

She was surprised, but Ai Fa didn't permit this young man from coming near her. She kept herself more than an arm length away and kept backing off.

The young man's sorrowed expression suddenly stiffened.

「Ai Fa, the Fou house is a weak and impoverished family. We have to work together with other small houses in order to survive. As a hunter, I'm not as outstanding as your father—— much less the men from the Wu clan, I can't even hold a candle to them.」

「... So? The size of one's house doesn't matter.」

「Ai Fa, if this is what you really think, I hope you can become a member of the Fou family. The second brother of the Fou house, Masa Fou would like to propose to Ai Fa of house Fa.」

Ai Fa stood stiffly in shock.

Even though she was an undesirable woman, why would anyone propose to her —— this wasn't the only reason she was surprised. Because this young man shouldn't be saying this.

「Wait, second brother of the Fou house, am I mistaken? I always thought—— that you wish to take Celice Von as your wife——」

「That has not been confirmed yet. If I cancel the engagement and apologize to the Von house properly, it won't cause any trouble in the future.」

「You want to cancel your engagement with Celice Von!? Why!?」

Ai Fa unconsciously increased her volume.

The young man... Masa Fou's gentle face showed a serious expression as he looked at Ai Fa.

「I have always admired you, but you said you wanted to live as a hunter. The truth is, you and Gill Fa hunted more kiba than the Fou house. To suppress my own feelings, I told myself that no matter how beautiful you are, you still have a soul of a hunter. However, the young Gill Fa succumbed to the forest, and you—— won't be able to live on as a hunter.」

「.....」

「And so, I can't suppress my feelings anymore! The thoughts of you marrying another man... that someone other than me holding you in their arms... intense emotions burst forth just from the thoughts of that, as if my insides had caught fire! So I——」

「If possible, I want to live on as a hunter.」

Ai Fa's strong voice cut Masa Fou off.

Masa Fou shook his head and said:

「Impossible, no one can hunt alone. Gill Fa was by your side in the past, that's why you didn't succumb to the forest. You are a woman, if you head into the woods alone——」

「If I die in the forest, then I accept this fate!」

Ai Fa hit the ground hard with the machete in her right hand.

The blade struck deep into the earth.

「You betrayed Celice Von's trust. Even if I'm not a hunter, I have no intention of becoming your spouse. Second brother of the Fou house, scram! I—— hate men like you the most!」

For a short while, Masa Fou stood there quietly.

He then slowly turned and disappeared from Ai Fa's sight like a depressed child.

And then—— from the opposite direction where that young man left, a weak voice was uttered.

「Why...」

Ai Fa turned around slowly.

She saw Celice Von whose face was as pale as the dead standing in the shade of the Fa house.

「Celice Von...」

Ai Fa was about to walk over.

「Don't come here!」

The next instant, she screamed in a shrill voice.

Ai Fa stopped and looked at Celice Von.

Tears covered Celice Von's face.

Her voice was hoarse from anger, but her face was covered in tears.

「...Ai Fa, it's not your fault...」

Celice Von finally said in a trembling voice:

「It's because Masa Fou is too soft hearted... And I'm too dumb... Ai Fa, it's not your fault at all...」

Celice Von then disappeared from Ai Fa's sights too.

Ai Fa raised her face and glared at the clear blue sky.

Her heart was a mess.

She had lost one of her few friends.

The sense of loss and depression stole the strength from her limbs.

But Ai Fa didn't immerse herself in this emotion. She raised her right arm and punched at the wall with all her might.

「What kind of joke is this!? What did I do!?!」

And so, Ai Fa stopped troubling over it.

Part 4

「... Ai Fa of house Fa, is this your answer?」

Donda Wu asked in a deep voice.

This was the promised third day.

The place was still the entrance of the Fa house, and the clan head was also with his three sons today too.

Ai Fa merely greeted the other party, but Donda Wu realized Ai Fa's intention from the way she was dressed.

Her attire—— a hunter's cape made from the hide of a kiba, with a sabre and knife on her waist. This was the attire of a hunter.

On Ai Fa's neck was the necklace from her late father Gill Fa. For Ai Fa, this necklace seemed to be heavier than a steel blade.

It was Gill Fa's pride as a hunter! The price he got from the forest at the expense of his own life.

「I have decided to live on as a hunter, so I can't marry into the Wu clan. I'm sorry for turning down your goodwill.」

「Hmmp... Looks like you are more foolish than I thought, Ai Fa of house Fa.」

Donda Wu was fuming quietly.

In order to keep herself from getting overwhelmed by his burning eyes, Ai Fa clenched her fists.

「Tending to a family and nurturing the children... You want to toss aside the work of a woman and pretend to be a hunter?」

「Yes. I will work hard, become a hunter on my own rights one day, and be acknowledged by everyone.」

「You think you can hunt kiba alone?」

「Before I was thirteen, my father Gill performs his work as a hunter by himself. He needed to take care of me and my mother Mei too, but I just needed to hunt for myself, so I will have an easier time.」

「... You think your father wants you to live like this?」

Ai Fa inhaled shallowly, then said:

「I don't know what my father Gill thinks, but I chose this path by my own will.」

After Gill Fa's soul had been summoned back by the forest, he might sigh and moan if he saw Ai Fa like this, thinking she wasn't ready yet, and it would be too rash for her to head into the forest ——

But that was all just her imagination.

Ai Fa's mind was set.

What was right, what others hope she would do, what she should do—— She stopped all this troubling question, decided to focus on what she wanted to do, and made her choice.

She wants to live as a hunter.

This idea had been on Ai Fa's mind since a long, long time ago.

She must live as a hunter, or she must live as a woman—— she tossed aside the term 「must」, and there was just one answer left.

She didn't know what was the right thing to do, but she knew what she wanted to do.

Ai Fa wants to live as a hunter.

She didn't want to stay at home and wait for the men to return. She wants to enter the forest and hunt for prey.

If she couldn't live as she wished, she should let her soul return to the forest —— Ai Fa decided to live on with her father's words in her heart.

If Ai Fa's decision was wrong, the forest would definitely summon back Ai Fa's soul. She still couldn't wield a sabre properly, but the fifteen year old Ai Fa still decided to live alone as a hunter. If her decision was wrong, she would succumb to the forest.

「... There must be many who don't wish for you to die, are you going to ignore their wishes, Ai Fa?」

Donda Wu said with a calmer voice.

However, contrary to his voice, his blue eyes was wild.

He probably thinks that Ai Fa was ignoring the feelings and will of his family.

Ai Fa quietly regulated her breathing and answered:

「There should be few who will agree to my choice. But I won't change my decision because of other people's thoughts.」

Would Jiba Wu and Rimee Wu wail in despair when they learn of Ai Fa's decision? Or would they be enraged?

Even if they reacted that way, Ai Fa wouldn't care.

Even if they accuse her of being foolish, there wasn't any rules against women becoming hunters in Forest's Edge.

Maybe no one had such foolish thoughts in the past, so there wasn't any clear rules against such behavior.

Therefore, she didn't need to feel any shame over the way she lived her life.

Apologizing to the brutish Tsun clan or giving up on her goals to marry into the Wu clan didn't suit Ai Fa either.

I probably can't meet Grandma Jiba and Rimee Wu again.

This was only natural since she had seriously angered the head of the Wu clan.

She wouldn't be able to hold Jiba Wu's shrivelled fingers or see Rimee Wu's smile again. Just that thought alone—— made her chest felt like exploding.

Because Ai Fa was unwilling to apologize to the Tsun clan, the Von house and Fou house has started avoiding Ai Fa. Now that the Wu clan had severed ties with her, Ai Fa was truly alone now.

Even so, she still didn't want to change.

Changing herself for the sake of appeasing others —— she didn't think there's any meaning in doing that.

If no one in this world would accept the way Ai Fa was —— She would live on by herself.

「You are the one who decides your own path... Ai Fa of house Fa, it seems that the path you seek doesn't cross with the Wu clan.」

「Yes, it seems that way.」

Donda Wu turned and left after hearing Ai Fa's answer.

His three sons followed their father in silence.

And so, Ai Fa was alone.

She started living in solitude.

The meat and vegetable lying in the food store and the tusks and horns hanging on her neck. She had to hunt a kiba before her supplies ran out, or she would starve to death —— This would be her first trial.

Since I'm the only one in the house, I just need to hunt one kiba every ten days. If I can't even do this much, I don't have the rights to live as a hunter.

However, what she needed wasn't food.

Her clothes and blades were all bought with the money earned through the tusks and horns. She had her own knife, so even if her father's knife broke, she could replace it. But there was only one sabre in the house. If it broke, it would set her back by 30 kibas worth of tusks and horns.

... Instead of worrying about breaking the blade, I should train up my strength in order to wield this sabre.

Ai Fa picked up the sabre and returned to her house.

Even though she could intimidate humans with it, she would lose her life if she tried the same in the forest. She couldn't enter the forest with a weapon she couldn't use.

Alright the, time to go.

It had been five days since her last hunt.

A feeling that was either joy or fear ran down her spine, and Ai Fa was about to step out——

A small figure stood before her.

「Uwah! Ai Fa, so you are going to be a hunter after all!」

It was Rimee Wu.

Ai Fa lost her voice momentarily—— right after that, she composed herself and said:

「Rimee Wu, what are you doing here?」

「Hmm? Because I'm worried about you, and I kept waiting until Papa Donda and the others leave! Papa Donda and Darum-nii has angry faces, so I knew you have turned down the proposal!」

Rimee Wu was all smiles, and kept running around Ai Fa.

「You look so cool! This is Gill Fa's hunter cape, right? Ai Fa, it suits you!」

「.....」

「By the way, Ai Fa, when you were still a kid, you wore the hide of a young kiba before, right? You looked really cute like that too!」

Rimee Wu laughed out loud.

Her smile made Ai Fa felt blissed.

A surprising amount of love almost exploded out of Ai Fa's tightly sealed heart.

Even at a time like this, Rimee Wu was still smiling at her.

Everyone ostracized Ai Fa, but this little girl still think of her as a friend? Ai Fa was about to kneel down and hug the small petite and warm body with all her might.

She wanted to cry like a child with abandon.

But Ai Fa suppressed that urge just before it overwhelmed her.

It took all that she had to contain the bursting emotions in her heart. She then started walking again.

「Ah, wait! I finally get to see you again, where are you going?」

「... I have decided to live on as a hunter. It is already past noon, I'm going into the woods.」

「Oh, I see. Then be careful Ai Fa. I will pray for your safety with all my might!」

Ai Fa stopped, then said with her back towards Rimee Wu:

「Rimee Wu, don't visit the Fa house again.」

「Eh!? Why!?」

From Rimee Wu's breathing, Ai Fa knew she was standing still.

Ai Fa didn't turn back and continued:

「I angered Donda Wu. As a member of the Wu clan, you should empathize with your clan head's feelings.」

「What do you mean!? I don't understand! Are you talking about making Papa Donda mad because you turned down the proposal? It's fine! I'm not involved with that!」

「Not just that, I also got on the bad side of the Tsun clan. Everyone around me might be dragged into trouble too. So—— you shouldn't come near me.」

Rimee Wu was quiet for a moment.

She then said in an elusive tone:

「But... if you are bothered by this, you will end up alone.」

Ai Fa cast her gaze to the vast forest in the distance and answered:

「That's fine too. I attacked a member of the chief clan, and turned down the goodwill of the Wu clan. Finally, I decided to be a hunter despite being a woman. There isn't anyone who can understand how I feel, so I want to live by myself.」

She could live on alone.

And so, she didn't want to involve anyone else.

Without compromising her resolve, to live in the forest, and die in the forest—— that was the only thing Ai Fa wanted.

「I don't want that! I want to stay with you!」

Rimee Wu insisted stubbornly.

Ai Fa shook her head and stopped in her tracks.

「No matter what, I don't have time to play with anyone now. Rimee Wu, go back to the Wu clan, and don't come near the Fa house ever again.」

「I said I don't want that! I will definitely come and meet you again!」

Rimee Wu's voice was breaking up.

Just these words was enough to satisfy Ai Fa.

It's fine even if she didn't visit. Ai Fa was satisfied that she said 「I want to meet you again.」

Rimee Wu, that's enough.

Even if their bonds were severed, she still had a wonderful time with Rimee Wu and the others in the past. The memories in the bottom of her heart would not fade away.

Celice Von made Ai Fa realize this.

Even if Celice Von hate or detest her, the smile she showed Ai Fa in the past would not become a lie. The warm sensation of her fingers were still lingering on Ai Fa's shoulders.

And her father Gill Fa.

Gill Fa was dead.

She wouldn't be able to meet Gill Fa ever again.

Even so, Gill Fa will probably never disappear from her heart.

Rimee Wu—— Grandma Jiba—— Celice Von—— my life in the past was only so blissful because you are all with me.

Ai Fa then hid her feelings deep in her heart and lived on.

Even though he had passed on, Gill Fa was still her father, and Mei Fa was still her mother. Hence, even if they were destined to be apart, Rimee Wu, Jiba Wu and Celice Von would still be Ai Fa's friends.

As long as Ai Fa held on to this thinking—— She could continue to live on.

「Stupid Ai Fa! Unreasonable!」

Rimee Wu's wail came from behind her, and gradually grew further away.

Ai Fa listened to the crying sound behind her as she walked into the forest.

Even though tears kept rolling down her cheeks, she didn't have any doubts in her heart.

Two years later, a strange foreigner appeared in Ai Fa's house.